REACTIONS TO RELATIVISM: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE ETHICAL THOUGHT OF REINHOLD NIEBUHR AND DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

by

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FOREWORD

The general problem with which this work is concerned is one which has impressed me as being central to man's self-understanding and to his understanding of his social environment. I am convinced that the relation of "relative" and "absolute" provides a valid means of structuring knowledge and interpreting ethical realities. Dr. James Van Allen, noted physicist on the faculty at The University of Iowa, once stated in a lecture that a scientist must develop a "handle" by which to grasp the myriads of new facts and ideas which flood his field of investigation. The issue of relative and absolute is such a rational handle, one according to which an individual's understanding may be developed. A part of my purpose herein is to explore some of the nuances and implications of this means of understanding reality, in the hope that, considering the complexities of modern life, some degree of needed clarification may be provided.

It is intended that this work will serve to demonstrate and support the thesis that, given the nature reality, of man, and of human thought, ethical relativism is an unprofitable theoretical position. The ethical thought of Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer is used to support this contention, and for deriving alternatives to relativistic theory. Though they readily admit most of the facts upon which relativistic theories are usually based, they tend to reject the theories themselves, and to develop ways by which the unwanted effects of relativism can be overcome. This could become a purely analytic task wherein the subject would be elaborated at a length great enough so that the desired conclusions would follow deductively. Though I am not convinced that such a procedure would be without merit, my method will rather be to develop the ethical thinking of these two modern Protestant theologians in an effort to provide some synthetic material which will bring pertinent insights into the discussion. The urgency of our contemporary moral situations and the need to answer difficult ethical questions legitimize such an undertaking.

Reinhold Niebuhr and Dietrich Bonhoeffer have been chosen for consideration in this work in part because they are influential, representative, and appealing personalities in the realm of Protestant ethical thought. In the process of studying them I have become convinced that their thought offers opportunities both for exploring the relation of the relative and the absolute and for gaining knowledge of vital Christian alternatives in the face of problems which that relation exposes. By and large, the material in the chapters concerning these thinkers has been compiled inductively, according to my general interest in the question being considered. Consequently there is ground for maintaining that they have been treated "as they appear" to an investigator, though of course the finished product reflects the interests of this work and cannot pretend to be a totally authoritative interpretation of the ethics of either thinker as he might state it systematically.

The fundamental purpose of this work is not only to present and shore up an argument concerning the author's particular beliefs, but also to ascertain inductively and describe accurately the nature of the ethical thinking of Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer as regards the question of ethical relativism. It is obvious that I do believe that ethical relativism is not a viable option for people who have a real concern about today's moral situations. But this work is not intended to be only an exposition of my thinking. Due to the intended purpose of the work and to the inductive nature of the procedure, it will sometimes occur that the arguments concerning relativism are not clearly established in the thought of Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer. Unfortunate as this may be, it is not avoidable, since neither in Niebuhr nor in Bonhoeffer does there appear a completed and deductively "clean" argument on this head.

Doctoral dissertations concerning Reinhold Niebuhr exist in abundance, and Bonhoeffer studies are also multiplying at a good pace. But in spite of the plethora of studies, it appears that their ethical insights have not yet been thoroughly exploited in relation to the problems posed by relativism. From all of their writings, portions have been selected for concentration which reveal their estimations of human nature, their fundamental philosophical and religious positions, and their opinions concerning questions of ethics in a relativistic age. Chapter I provides an introduction into the problem, including a discussion of the questions of definition and a consideration of some of the implications of relativism for contemporary thought.

It can be said with justification that this work is too broad or that it attempts to do too much. It is true that the relation of relative and absolute cannot be shown simply by means of some particular investigative technique or by limiting oneself to analysis of language. However, if meaning is not limited according to "verification" criteria alone, and if it be sought in that larger "spiritual" realm of thinking which, as Niebuhr maintains, borders on the mysterious, then the search for overall perspective in terms of the relation of relative and absolute takes on new plausibility. I do not claim that this work "solves" the problem of ethical relativism, but am attempting merely to discern the problem, to discuss its implications, and to point out possible ways (in Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer) by which some of its effects may be minimized. Consequently, aside from an apology to those who perchance are offended by this procedure, I do not think that further justification for this largeness of scope is either necessary or possible.

It may also be observed that this work is too selective at points, or that it omits pertinent data and selects unimportant facts. This possibity is also admitted, and the admission is accompanied by an appeal to the reader for clemency in recognition of the fact that some rather arbitrary limits have to be established. This work has been written out of a concern for the practical moral situations of lay people. Ethical theory is of little benefit unless it is usable, and I believe that theoretical expositions need not be as irrelevant to practical concerns as so often they are represented. If this treatise contributes in any way to a valid Christian approach to our complicated eithical situation which can be of help to the practical Christian life, then it is worthwhile.

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INTRODUCTION

There is much confusion in ethical thinking today. Numerous causes for this could be cited, and various factors can be demonstrated as converging in the thought of our modern day to bring about this state of affairs. Rapid change has served to upset long-established ethical systems and ways of thinking. The methods and accomplishments of science have had a telling effect upon traditionalism in philosophy and upon ethical thought in particular. Our daily routines are becoming increasingly complex and perplexing. Choices must be made which may often have far-reaching consequences. This is a dilemma involving not only social and political leadership, but, increasingly, less prominent individuals as well. The ground-swell of social opinion seems to be converging upon the individual in his environment, posing acute problems which cry out for solution, even while the basis which makes such decision possible and intelligible is ambiguous at best.

The confusion appears to be inherent in our modern situation. It is not only that numerous moral alternatives are available, but part of the problem is that man finds himself cut off from a real basis for making his decisions, without a fundamental faith-perspective which would make valid decision intelligible. Man has difficulty in making an intelligent moral choice if he has no basic rationale from which to make it, and if he has no believable criterion for drawing distinctions between right and wrong. Men do make moral choices, because they must. They do so from some moral perspective, whether it be consciously understood, merely recognized but unexamined, or even entirely unrecognized. While the problem for the individual man is how to live his life under these conditions, the problem for ethical theory is to examine and describe the situation in order to derive a prescriptive solution. This task can be undertaken in a number of ways. The approach chosen here is to examine the problem from the stance of Christian ethical thought, asking of Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer (who are acknowledged spokesmen for Christian theology) what the Christian man should think and do in light of the confusion in ethics and the apparently increasing popularity of relativism in the world in which he lives.

CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM OF RELATIVISM IN CONTEMPORARY THOUGHT

The word "relativism" has many meanings. When qualified by the adjective "ethical," the scope and variety of these meanings are somewhat reduced, but there is still uncertainty as to the precise significance of the term. Therefore it is important to consider some possible meanings of "ethical relativism," and to remove some difficulties in its interpretation.

As used popularly, relativism means either that there is no objective basis for choosing values, or that in ordering behavior one act is just as "right" as another. Evidence for ethical relativism is found in the fact that there is considerable difference of opinion concerning moral beliefs and in the difficulty with which these beliefs can be verified scientifically. Choices are made according to one's individual preference, according to family or group norms, and so forth. The essential belief of this popular relativism is that there exist no absolute norms or standards for moral choice, since there is no absolute truth to be had in the area of ethics. Today, relativistic attitudes are often held in conjunction with some particular motif of social rebellion against traditions.

In its technical uses in religious and philosophical ethics, "relativism" may differ from the popular interpretation. As an ethical principle, relativism may take a number of forms. One of these is what R. B. Perry calls "epistemological relativism, or scepticism." He describes this as a particularly "vicious type," elaborating in this fashion: "He who identifies the act of cognizing values with the act of the subject which constitutes them, or holds that values are both known and created in one and the same act, does imply the impossibility of knowing anything whatsoever about value."[1] This is "vicious" because it is skepticism concerning knowledge of values, and because value, for Perry, is the creation of the thinking process.

A more moderate form of ethical relativism as a principle is represented by Perry's own thesis that "value is any object of any interest," because "what we mean by calling a thing 'good' is that it is desired."[2] But this is a "relational" and not strictly a relativist definition of value, because it emphasizes the relation between subject and object in the process of creating and knowing values, and because it allows Perry to interpret value as objective in the sense that it attaches to any object in which an interest is taken. In his opinion,

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[1] "Value as Any Object of Any Interest," pp. 292-309 of Wilfrid Sellars and John Hospers, eds., Readings in Ethical Theory (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1952). See pp. 296-297.

[2] Ibid., p. 298.

> a relational definition, such as that here proposed, is the only means of avoiding contradiction. It is not denied that the same object may be both liked and disliked; this is the very premise of the objection. If, then good is defined as being liked, and evil as being disliked, it follows that the same object may in this sense be without contradiction both good and evil.[1]

Another ethical system based on a relativistic motif is that of so-called "situational ethics." This seems to be an increasingly popular motif in Protestant ethics today, among such thinkers as Paul Lehmann, Paul Ramsey, Joseph Fletcher, Walter Dirks, and others. In general, the principle of this "school" is that right and wrong, good and bad are dependent upon the situation in which the ethical agent finds himself. He is bound to make decisions, and in order to make correct ones he must always take into consideration the immediate situation, with all of its contingent and fluctuating circumstances. This is relativism because it involves the rejection of ethical absolutes, whether they be ideals, values, laws, or principles. There may be a flexible principle, such as "love," or "obligation,"[2] but in this case it is a principle

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1. *Ibid*., p. 302.

2. Cf. especially Joseph Fletcher, "Six Propositions: The New Look in Christian Ethics," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Oct. 1959, pp. 7-18 and Walter Dirks, "How Can I Know What God Wants of Me?", *Cross Currents*, Vol. V, No. 1 (1955), pp. 76-92.

which is applicable to situations. Rigid absolutes, in this view, are generally held to result in injustice because each situation is unique, so that injecting rules into it results in an artificiality and distortion of true relationships. As we shall observe, both Reinhold Niebuhr and Dietrich Bonhoeffer express variations upon this theme, though we do not term their thinking as "relativistic" in any vicious or skeptical sense.

The argument also appears that there should be no absolute moral standards because factually the standards which do exist are the products of individual cultures which "create" their own values and moral norms, supposedly in historical freedom. This interpretation, which has been put forward by certain anthropologists, suggests that types of behavior are selected from a relatively unlimited "arc of selection," making for a kind of theoretical situation which may be described as "cultural relativism."[1]

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[1] See Ruth Benedict, Patterns of Culture, intro. Franz Boaz and pref. Margaret Mead (New York: The New American Library, A Mentor Book, 18th printing 1960). Different cultures "are travelling along different roads in pursuit of different ends, and these ends and these means in one society cannot be judged in terms of those of another society, because essentially they are incommensurable," (p. 196). Benedict finds that it is helpful to recognize the thoroughgoing nature of cultural relativity, in order to controvert absolutisms and thus reach a hopeful new "scientific" outlook (see pp. 238-240).

Still another kind of usage of ethical relativism is one in which the opinion is held that everything is in flux. One might use in simile the thought of the ancient atomists, who believed that reality is composed of atoms at motion in a void. People are the atoms; their freedom is absolute, because there is no fixed limitation or reference point to which they must relate. Here relations are exceedingly complex. There is no meaning in an external sense; it is a state of moral nihilism. It is like being in a fog without even ground beneath one's feet as a constant; there is only continual motion, a flux of relationships which require one's decision, and there is no external source of advice which one may use in making these decisions.[1] Some versions of atheistic existentialism fit this general description.

Relativism in ethics may then be described as a position or attitude in which particular actions are judged right or wrong and particular values chosen entirely within the point of view of the person judging. There are no absolute grounds for preferring one viewpoint to another. This definition, equating relativism with subjectivism, is an interpretation which holds that ethical standards depend on the "subject" in the process of willing and knowing. This is perhaps the

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1. This sort of situation is what both Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer deplore, and which Bonhoeffer believed is more or less actual in contemporary Western society.

most common interpretation on both popular and technical levels. However, from the point of view of language, and considering the knowing and willing process, ethical standards might just as possibly be relative, not to the subject, but to the object. In other words, relativism is not necessarily subjectivism, but rather it is any attitude or theory in which it is believed that there are no fixities or absolutes. This would be true whether the person in question believes that "relative" applies to the subject, the object, or the relation between them.

There is even a sense in which radical subjectivism may be considered as absolutism. This could be true in the case of an absolute obligation which lies within the agent or subject, or in the case of an absolute value to be sought, the value residing within the subject, for example self-realization or absolute freedom. Relativism is therefore not to be identified with subjectivism, but should be understood rather as being at a pole logically opposite from ethical absolutism. Perhaps the simplest point of departure for securing a definition, and therefore at least a preliminary understanding, of ethical relativism, is within the respective realms of axiology and deontology. So considered, the type of ethical relativism being examined may be classified according to the ways in which the following questions should be answered: "To what are values relative?", and "To what are obligations relative?". In this way types of relativism can be distinguished, such that values and obligations are relative to the subject, the object, the relation between subject and object, the culture, the will of God, individual prerogatives, and so on. This definition reflects the essential distinction between relative and absolute, which is that the absolute is self-determined, while the relative is determined by some entity external to itself.

Relativism in ethics can also correctly be said to be an antinomy of ethical universalism. An ethical universal would tend to be an ethical absolute also, though an absolute (as in the case of a subjective absolute) would not necessarily have to be universally held.

There remains a distinction to be made between "relativity" and "relativism." It should be obvious that one may subscribe to a theory that ethical choices are made within a general situation of ethical relativity, without at the same time being a "relativist" of a radical, vicious, or subjectivist type. The situation of relativity may pertain to cultural or group influence upon the individual who chooses. And one may hold to an absolute faith in God, or to a faith in God as the absolute, at the same time that he admits the relativity of human desires and decisions.

The "general theory of relativity," as derived in modern physics, does not justify ethical relativism. Hans

Reichenbach has interpreted Einstein's general theory so that, far from wiping out all objective truth, it has served to point up the arbitrary nature of descriptions and interpretations of that objective truth, and thus, secondarily, to guarantee it.[1] There are different ways of interpreting the objective facts, according to bias, custom, convenience, and so on. The important thing, for Reichenbach, is that the description is one which is fruitful in leading to the discovery of new facts. It is true, however, that the theory of relativity, interpreted in its meaning for ethics, holds previously believed "absolute verities" under scrutiny, and makes the construction of such absolutes undesirable.

In general, thinkers who favor the "relative" tend to advocate change or a readiness to accept change, and are quick to point out the tentative nature of human thought. They tend to be impatient with ancient ways of doing things and to be dissatisfied with traditional standards for governing human behavior. On the other hand, those who favor the "absolute" stress elements of permanence in human experience and are confident of man's ability to ascertain truth. They tend to be conservative where tradition is concerned, and to emphasize the importance of principles for thought and action. One may take an extremist position regarding either relative or absolute, though no doubt the majority of intelligent thinkers prefer a modification of one or the other. Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer both fall into the latter category.

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[1] See Reichenbach's discussion in From Copernicus to Einstein, trans. Ralph B. Winn (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1942). On pp. 105-106 he says: "Einstein has not made everything relative. Only some things have become relative, particularly things previously regarded as absolute verities. On the other hand, the theory has made clearer the things which are true regardless of the arbitrariness of descriptions. By pointing out the arbitrary additions made by man in his description of nature for what they are, Einstein's theory has made objective truth stand out more visibly than ever!"

As analyzed above, ethical relativism is somewhat of an hypothetical opponent. Historically, several distinguished thinkers have been advocates of relativism (ranging from Protagoras in ancient times to Hume, Westermarck, Ayer, Ruth Benedict, and others more recently). These provide theoretical opposition, but the current problem is not so much a question of pure theory as a practical matter of concern. Ethical relativism appears today not as merely a plausible theoretical alternative, but as a live option which many laymen are taking for granted. It could successfully be shown that man's increasing trust in reason, especially in science, and his corresponding rejection of religious controls over his life have coincided with if not caused the relativistic spirit. Modern man does not readily submit himself to absolute controls.

In order to illustrate the kind of problem which relativism sometimes poses, its ethical picture can be applied to some of the areas of contemporary life. Many social commentators now agree by consensus that social welfare should be regulated according to human needs in every changing situation rather than by some absolute standard. This line of thought can easily be substantiated by pointing to actual instances of injustice and inequity under social systems which are governed according to abstract or absolute standards. It is common for "moralists" (a term referring, in this type of argument, to those who adhere to and advocate moral codes and standards) to come in for some scathing abuse from those who recognize the inadequacy of said moralistic systems, and who accordingly accuse the "moralists" of footdragging on social issues. A favorite accusation within the argumentative arsenal of social and religious relativism is that absolutists are "behind the times" or are clinging to some old and outmoded theories which are no longer relevant in our changing modern world. The growing awareness of human relativity makes it necessary that ethical absolutes be examined or discarded. The problem in this is not in the fact that such anti-absolutist complaints are leveled, but in the confusion which relativism both pictures and fosters.

The field of political thought and activity is rife with debates along similar lines. The modern sophisticate is one who realizes the tentative nature of his own political position, one who believes that truth is relative or who is cynical concerning the possession of political power. It is common for such to look with condescension upon more "provincial" attitudes, and it is a questionable sophistication which insists that one's own group is in the right absolutely. The place of personal political convictions in the face of open-minded analysis and legitimate opposition is problematic. And the moral rectitude of autonomous military action, however expedient it might appear or be, is subject to question.

In the area of individual conduct the effects of relativism are likewise serious. It is often asserted today that no one has any right to tell anyone else what he should do, because everyone knows that what is "right" for one person is not necessarily "right" for another. Furthermore, in relativistic thinking it is particularly reprehensible for one society to restrain or impose its own standards upon another, even (in certain extreme applications of this position) for society to punish a rebellious individual within its own ranks. This is not to say that everyone's ethical standards (or lack of same) are wholly subjective in nature, or that there are no two identical sets of ethical norms, or that there is not a substantial area of agreement concerning the proper ways to behave. But it is to say that ethical norms are coming increasingly to be interpreted as relative, for they are not really "standard" and certainly not universal. They are contingent upon the personal preferences of the individual and the developmental circumstances of society. With this basis, a debilitative ethic of "anything goes" is a distinct possibility for many individuals and groups.

The dispute about relative and absolute in ethics is reflected, in the adjoining areas of politics and social and religious thinking, in the dichotomy between "liberal" and "conservative" types of thought. These opposing emphases may be understood according to their respective attitudes toward change. The "liberal" is usually receptive to change, seeing the need for rapid acceptance of new thoughts and ideas, and insisting that one must be open-minded and not over-zealous to protect the ancient ways. The "conservative" may also be receptive to change, although his attitude is that change must come gradually, so as not to upset the equilibrium of things or cause an undue amount of chaos in that which is established. Not all liberals are relativistic, of course, though the tendency may be in this direction. And not all conservatives are absolutistic, though in the conservative camp one is much more likely to discover those who cherish ideals and established ways which are near-absolute in their influence over men. The difference between liberal and conservative is sometimes minimized. And yet in modern times the gap has often become tremendous between these two attitudes, especially in the recognition that man has the freedom and intelligence to govern himself and even perhaps to make up his own rules as he goes along. There are elements of this humanistic emphasis within pragmatism, and it is exceedingly strong in existentialist thought.

The empirical method in vogue today is such that if it is rigorously employed its effects are that it can preclude the possibility of epistemological and ethical absolutes. This is true, at least, if such absolutes are understood as abstract principles or ideals. An emphatic empiricism insists upon induction, based upon observation of factual and concrete details and subject to verification according to the same method, as the only guaranteed path to knowledge.[1] Nothing must be "given" at the start of the knowledge process. Nothing must be taken for granted, no source remains inviolable against skeptical questions, no authority is above being subjected to analysis and exposure of its presuppositions. In ethics a rigorous empiricism can result in a consistent relativism, in which absolutely no standards are

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1. A scientist will of course rely greatly upon careful deduction, but many popularizations of science, which are being accounted for here, do not magnify this reality.

recognized as given, no mores or customs are taken for granted, no religious or rationalistic ethic is above question, and no absolute kind of behavior is acknowledged as required of all men.

The absolutist is at a disadvantage in ethical argument, for he is usually given the task of verifying according to empirical techniques what by the nature of the case cannot be verified in this manner. Because the absolutist depends utterly upon principles and standards which he must acknowledge are given to him from sources beyond his empirical power to grasp, he is not able to subject them to reductive analysis and subsequent naturalistic explanation. This is true for absolutism which has a rationalistic basis or pragmatic interest as well as for that which has a more explicitly religious rationale and foundation.

The issue under investigation is especially crucial to Protestant theology and Protestant ethics, due largely to the elements of skepticism inherent within Protestantism concerning the efficacy of human reason, and also due to the historical nature of incipient relativism which pervades those general areas of thought which have cut themselves off from long-accepted modes and usages. Protestant absolutism, where it is visible and forthright, takes as its ground and authority either God himself, the Revelation which God has given to man in the Holy Scriptures, the Proclamation of God's Word to man, and so forth. Catholic absolutism likewise claims divine authority, of course, but differs in that the authority as given is believed to reside in a visible society of human beings, namely the Church itself. At any rate, the issue appears to be more crucial and imminent for Protestants.

Both Reinhold Niebuhr and Dietrich Bonhoeffer have spoken extensively regarding Christian ethics. Both likewise seem concerned, not to formulate a system of moral theory as such for its own sake, but rather to make the truth of Christ live in human lives in the application of Christian ethics within man's experience. And yet there is much within their writings of a theoretical nature.

It is the contention of this work that ethical theory is necessary and inescapable. Man is a thinking being, whose great distinction is that he can reflect in abstract terms and is a moral agent whose abstractions have a real effect upon his decisions and his actions. The problem of concern in this discourse is a matter of moral theory, although it impinges upon practice at every hand. Few people who act unthinkingly out of habit or solely according to societal customs would be greatly concerned with this problem, even though they are affected by its solution. But the problem of relativism does concern those who are aware of the impact that a man's attitudes and beliefs and logical presuppositions have upon the way he decides and acts. And it affects them because of the imminence and the imperative nature of the ethical questions which are central to all of human social life.

In summary, the problem is this: ethical thinking is in a state of confusion due to rapid change and increasing complexity in human desires and possibilities. People are faced with the inevitability of making moral choices at the same time that the bases which make such choices intelligible are progressively being eliminated. Ethical relativism is the general attitude that the bases for moral choosing are not absolute because the facts indicate that human values and obligations are relative. Relativistic theories such as cultural relativism, atheistic existentialism, and certain systems of philosophical ethics seem only to add to the confusion by insisting that man must do entirely without absolutes, that he must solve all of his social and ethical problems with pure intelligence aided by scientific method or resolve, and so forth.

The trouble with such relativistic theories is that they do not seem to suggest any method for complete resolution of the personal and social ethical issues which today require treatment. People who are influenced by these theories but who are without the necessary intelligence or scientific skill or resolve are left in a state of confusion from which they cannot extricate themselves. At its theoretical best, relativism may be a descriptive reflection of the open-minded outlook of modern man. As such, it may quite accurately portray the self-estimation and world-estimation of our age.[1] But at its theoretical worst, relativism can lead to situations of nihilism such as Bonhoeffer describes[2] or increasing injustice and inequality such as Niebuhr envisions.[3]

In what follows, an attempt has been made to disclose within the thought of Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer their commentary upon this problem and its solution in our times. In this commentary we find evidence which indicates the difficulties within relativism and which provides suggestions for a theoretical recovery of ethical intelligibility as a basis for practical moral choosing and action. Relativism is treated as a thesis to which contemporary thinkers must respond or react.

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[1] One such estimation of American attitudes was expressed as early as 1929 by Walter Lippmann, who, though certainly not a relativist, conveys his understanding of the relativistic assumptions upon which he believes much of modern thinking to be based. See A Preface to Morals (New York: Time Incorporated, 1964, first published in 1929). See also David W. Noble, The Paradox of Progressive Thought (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958).

[2] See infra, p. 188.

[3] See infra, chap. II, sec. iii, "Resources for achieving a better society."

CHAPTER II

REACTION TO RELATIVISM IN THE ETHICAL THOUGHT OF REINHOLD NIEBUHR

There exist certain methodological problems surrounding a study of the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr which must at least be acknowledged if said study is to be relatively free from examples of scholastic naïveté. The volume and variety of his writings is one source of difficulty, and this is compounded by the staggering amount of Niebuhr commentary which includes various interpretations and analyses of his thought. The student of Niebuhr is forced to be cognizant of at least the more important of these studies. And perhaps the prickliest methodological thicket of all is the matter of development in Niebuhr's thinking, change which unquestionably has occurred and continues to occur in his lifetime.

Niebuhr has interested himself in multifarious aspects of national, international, and social life during the present century, and in addition he has interpreted streams of thought and history. His ethical writings pervade much of this total contribution, for it is nearly impossible and perhaps questionable to excise certain portions of his work in order to label it "ethical" in distinction from other portions which are "social" or "political." Ethics, politics, history, all are bound up together in the totality of what Niebuhr is saying. Consequently a student of his ethical thought must deal with the other strains of thinking which are intermingled with the ethical. It becomes necessary, therefore, to select a particular procedure by which one is enabled to pursue a course that may be both accurate and representative of the whole of his thinking in this area.

Problems concerning the development of Niebuhr's ethical thinking exist aplenty. Some observers have found "stages" or "periods" in his thinking.[1] Others seek only to show development or change and to account for it by some explanation or other. Still others avidly search after "influences" which presumably must be found in order to understand the phenomenon which is Niebuhr. These pursuits have been the subjects of elongated studies in themselves. It is obvious to any astute observer that (1) no individual, and least of all perhaps, Niebuhr, remains mentally static in a grand denial of all new facts and discoveries, and (2) the fact of development in every individual's thinking must be recognized and admitted, and account taken of the complications this may involve for drawing valid conclusions regarding his thinking. Upon the admission of development, which "stage" in that person's thought is to be chosen as his essential position? What has caused his thinking to change? What are the influences upon him and what are the origins or roots of his thinking? In what respects can Niebuhr be understood as "a child of his times?"

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[1] See, for example, Will Herberg, "Niebuhr's Three Phases," Christian Century, (August 10, 1960), pp. 926-927.

In view of these problems, the course chosen for this study is (1) an attempt is made to recognize the difficulties involved and to see at what points the problem of development may be crucial or damaging to the central purpose of the work and to its conclusions; and (2) after recognition and admission, we make something of a "leap" over the problem, by observing that methodology, while important, does not need to be the central part of scholarly knowledge. One could conceivably become involved in the intricacies of questions relating to development, sources, and influences to the extent that one's entire energies are spent on these preliminaries, while the crucial questions which motivated the quest lie untreated. This recognition is equally as important as is the recognition that problems of methodology which can affect the outcome do exist. That the most important points of our knowledge are always to be interpreted developmentally is questionable. Perhaps it can only be argued that a writer must strive to be honest and informed concerning the existence of these problems while attempting to state his case in spite of this reality.

This approach frankly assumes that there is a basic unity and wholeness to the thought of Niebuhr. Much evidence could be marshalled for this sub-thesis, but in the final analysis such a thesis must devolve into an assumption. We see the developmental problem as in the end an epistemological problem, one in which certain assumptions simply must be made and believed in and adhered to if logical consistency is to be achieved. And without logical consistency, no amount of origins, influences, and developmental tracings can provide the kind of meaning which is sought. Put simply: Niebuhr, let us believe, can be understood by a systematic study (according to our question of concern in ethics) of the material contained in his writings, and that while his views are not abstract or static, they do comprise a consistent whole. That his thinking has developed is admitted, but development is deemed to be important only insofar as it may falsify some element which is represented as basic in his thought. An attempt to systematize what was not originally systematic (Niebuhr's writings are not without consistency, but he is not to be considered as a systematic theologian and/he does not attempt to present a "system") is defensible because such systematization is obviously a part of the way in which modern man thinks and understands.

Lastly, the central concern herein is not with the thought of Niebuhr per se, but with his thought and the thought of Bonhoeffer as they provide commentary upon a large and crucial question which troubles man in his moments of ethical concern. Thus the problem of development in Niebuhr can be treated as subsidiary to the question of his over-all reaction to ethical relativism. At certain points during the exposition the developmental question is acknowledged briefly and an effort made to show, at least by way of suggestion and probability, that the point in question must stand. In addition, the practice of including original publication dates in footnote references to Niebuhr's works is used for purposes of aiding the reader in making mental adjustments found necessary in view of the developmental problems.

i Relativity in Human Nature and the Universe

Niebuhr's ethical thought cannot be understood apart from his analysis of the nature of man and the universe. Therefore it is necessary to reconstruct the essence of these doctrines in his thinking. His ethical writings frequently make reference to his basic conceptions of human nature and destiny. Of course it is impossible for there to be ethical action or even opinion apart from man who does the acting or who gives the opinion. So a discussion of Niebuhr's ethics would be incongruous apart from his reference to the facts of human nature, and should not be discussed without consideration of the basic facts of existence which, in Niebuhr's opinion, make ethical thought and action possible.

Niebuhr attempts to explicate "the Christian view of man," as he understands it, basing on biblical source material and its interpretation. He believes that there is considerable value resident within this view, even though the view itself has largely been rejected by modern culture. This outlook is elaborated in conscious distinction from what he regards as "the classical view of man." The Christian view is, in his estimate, "determined by the ultimate presuppositions of Christian faith." Among these presuppositions are the beliefs that the world is the creation of God, that God who created it is "not merely mind" but "is both vitality and form and the source of all existence," and that the world is not God but nevertheless is good because a God who is good has created it.[1]

Man as a creature

Out of the biblical view of God as Creator and from the belief that his creation is good comes a conviction that man is "a created and finite existence in both body and spirit." This monistic view comes out of Hebrew thought, and is in distinction from the Greek or classical differentiation of man into body, soul, and mind or spirit.[1] Niebuhr consistently insists on this unity of the human personality or self.

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[1] See Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation (2 vols., 1 vol. ed., "The Gifford Lectures"; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), Vol. I, Human Nature (1941), p. 12. This work is viewed by many as Niebuhr's magnum opus and as authoritative for his basic theological perspective.

Man is created in the "image of God," which means that "he is understood primarily from the standpoint of God, rather than the uniqueness of his rational faculties or his relation to nature."[2] Man is indeed unique among the phenomena of nature, but this uniqueness consists in his being created in God's image. This is a religious insight, of course, but Niebuhr holds that it is given validation in what he considers to be the "facts" of human self-knowledge. And conversely, he finds revelation to be a confirmation of what the self knows about itself. These facts of self-knowledge are: (1) that man is obviously a child of nature, and (2) that man is less obviously, but just as certainly, in some sense transcendent in respect to that nature.

> The essential nature of man contains two elements; and there are correspondingly two elements in the original perfection of man. To the essential nature of man belong, on the one hand, all his natural endowments, and determinations, his physical and social impulses, his sexual and racial differentiations, in short his character as a creature imbedded in the natural order. On the other hand, his essential nature also includes the freedom of his spirit, his transcendence over natural process and finally his self-transcendence.[3]

This "paradoxical" truth about man shows that his essence or

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[1] See *ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 270

"nature" is that he is both part of nature (this is his creature-hood and affinity with the rest of creation) and transcendent over nature. The uniqueness and the paradox which Niebuhr finds in human nature combine to complicate his considerations of man's virtue and man's attempts to regulate his life.

> If man takes his uniqueness for granted he is immediately involved in questions and contradictions on the problem of his virtue. If he believes himself to be essentially good and attributes the admitted evils of human history to specific social and historical causes he involves himself in begging the question; for all these specific historical causes of evil are revealed, upon close analysis, to be no more than particular consequences and historical configurations of evil tendencies in man himself. They cannot be understood at all if a capacity for, and inclination toward, evil in man himself is not presupposed." If, on the other hand, man comes to pessimistic conclusions about himself, his capacity for such judgments would seem to negate the content of the judgments. How can man be "essentially" evil if he knows himself to be so? What is the character of the ultimate subject, the quintessential "I," which passes such devastating judgments upon itself as object?[1]

The transcendence over nature Niebuhr conceives of in terms of degrees of "self-transcendence." "The human spirit has the special capacity of standing continually outside itself in terms of indefinite regression." There is consciousness itself, which is "a capacity for surveying the world and determining action from a governing centre." And self-consciousness is seen as an even greater self-transcendence, inasmuch as "the self makes itself its own object in such a

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1. *Ibid*., p. 2.

way that the ego is finally always subject and not object." This is what is meant by understanding man "from the standpoint of God," that man in some degree is able to stand outside both himself and the world, viewing himself and the world of nature, as it were, "from beyond."[1]

Niebuhr gives this outlook empirical status, although of course there is the source of revelation from which it flows as well. Revelation is an epistemology of faith in God "as will and personality," and faith that God has the power and intention to reveal himself to man. Real individuality and personality are dependent on a faith-relationship to the God who creates and reveals. Man can understand himself fully, contends Niebuhr, only from this transcendent perspective of faith, for "to understand himself truly means to begin with a faith that he is understood from beyond himself, that he is known and loved of God and must find himself in terms of obedience to the divine will." Niebuhr has devoted considerable effort to a defense of this outlook against all naturalistic views of man, which he considers to be nonempirical in the sense that they overlook the basic facts of human introspective knowledge. He finds that such oversight causes self-misunderstanding at the point of either self-deification or else submergence of the self in mistrust of

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1. See ibid., p. 13-14.

one's own nature.[1] Niebuhr believes that within these considerations the Christian view of man is a live option in modern self-understanding.

Description of Niebuhr's view of human creaturehood is not completed with the delineation of man's high "stature." Perhaps even better known is his analysis of "the low estimate of human virtue in Christian thought," and his insistence that this estimate has a special pertinence for contemporary ethics. "Man is a sinner. His sin is defined as rebellion against God. The Christian estimate of human evil is so serious precisely because it places evil at the very centre of human personality: in the will."[2]

> Original sin, which is by definition an inherited corruption, or at least an inevitable one, is nevertheless not to be regarded as belonging to his responsibility. Sin is natural for man in the same sense that it is universal but not in the sense that it is necessary. . .
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> Sin is to be regarded as neither a necessity of man's nature nor yet as a pure caprice of his will. It proceeds rather from a defect of the will, for which reason it is not completely deliberate; but since it is the will in which the defect is found and the will presupposes freedom the defect cannot be attributed to a taint in man's nature.[3]

It is man's self-transcendence, the essence of his being in God's image, which likewise constitutes the essence of his ability and predisposition to sin. For the essence of man is "free self-determination." His sin is to be understood as the wrong use of his freedom.[1]

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[1] See *ibid.*, pp. 15-16. Quotation p. 15.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 242.

Man's natural and essential freedom is wrongly applied when he uses it to rebel against God because of a refusal to admit his creatureliness. Man pretends that he is not finite, that he is equal with God; or else he makes himself to be a god. He is free to transcend himself and the world, but his sin is occasioned by the fact that he regards this transcendence as an absolute perspective, and his freedom as being without limit.[2] Thus man's "misery" and his "dignity" have the same source or "root"; that root is part of man's essential nature--freedom.[3]

Sin is not just an affront to God, for it is also a self-contradiction. The very "law of his nature is love, a harmonious relation of life to life in obedience to the divine centre and source of his life."[4] The self cannot fulfill itself; it requires love relationships with others to be happy and complete. "Man is the kind of animal who cannot merely live. If he lives at all he is bound to seek the realization of his true nature; and to his true nature belongs his fulfillment in the lives of others."[1] But yet man sins and contradicts this law of his nature, for he tries to make himself the source and center of his own existence. Man is a "creator" in the sense that he transcends nature and has "dominion" over nature, but he corrupts his creativeness by trying too hard to escape his creatureliness.

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[1] See *ibid.*, p. 16.

[2] See *ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

[3] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Godly and the Ungodly: Essays on the Religious and Secular Dimensions of Modern Life* (London: Faber and Faber, Limited, 1959), p. 129. From the essay "Mystery and Meaning," based on sermons preached at Union Theological Seminary and Harvard University during 1956 and 1957.

[4] *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. I, *Human Nature* (1941), p. 16. Future references to this volume will be made as "*Human Nature*."

> The situation of finiteness and freedom in which man stands becomes a source of temptation only when it is falsely interpreted. This false interpretation is not purely the product of the human imagination. It is suggested to man by a force of evil which precedes his own sin. Perhaps the best description or definition of this mystery is the statement that sin posits itself, that there is no situation in which it is possible to say that sin is either an inevitable consequence of the situation nor yet that it is an act of sheer and perverse individual defiance of God.[2]

In describing Niebuhr's analysis of human nature, it is important to note that he defines man's transcendence not only in the sense that man has the freedom to choose among a variety of natural alternatives (the territory of reason

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1. Reinhold Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense (New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1944), p. 19.

2. Human Nature (1941), pp. 180-181.

contemplating its natural ends) but that he also transcends himself to the extent that he must choose "his total end." "He is confronted with endless potentialities and he can set no limit to what he ought to be, short of the character of ultimate reality." But the paradoxical truth about man, and one which contributes to the terrible ambiguity of man's moral considerations, is that "this same man is a creature whose life is definitely limited by nature and he is unable to choose anything beyond the bounds set by the creation in which he stands."[1]

This situation produces intolerable anxiety. It is the anxiety which tempts man to sin. Human sin falls into the categories of pride and sensuality. Pride becomes man's sin when "he seeks to raise his contingent existence to unconditioned significance." Sensuality results "when he seeks to escape from his unlimited possibilities of freedom, from the perils and responsibilities of self-determination, by immersing himself into a 'mutable good,' by losing himself in some natural vitality."[2] Niebuhr regards the doctrine of sin as a "dialectical truth" which contributes to man's self-understanding. It is inevitable, in that it comes out of a situation of self-contradiction which results from self-transcendence and the "image of God," but yet paradoxically it does not happen by natural necessity. "The final paradox is that the discovery of the inevitability of sin is man's highest assertion of freedom."[1]

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[1] Ibid., p. 162.

[2] Ibid., p. 186.

In his emphasis on the inevitability and persistence of sin in all human thought and action, Niebuhr has been accused of an undue pessimism concerning the nature of man. However there are also strong elements of a more optimistic assessment, especially in his estimate of man's high stature as God's image, and in his assertion that men possess moral resources, among them "a sense of obligation toward the good" which is arrived at through reason. According to this "principle of action," the individual is required "to act according to whatever judgments of good and evil he is able to form."[2] Niebuhr would prefer the descriptive "realism" to the epithet "pessimism" as regarding his understanding of man's nature. And it would seem that the bulk of his ethical writings, while giving due recognition to the fact of human sin and pretension, proceed on the basis of a hopeful outlook concerning the possibilities for man.

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[1] Ibid., p. 263.

[2] Reinhold Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932, renewal 1960), p. 37.

In summary, let us consider Niebuhr's basic ideas concerning "the Christian view" of man. Note that he is writing within a Christian perspective, and that the description which he gives of the Christian view is also to be understood as Niebuhr's view, inasmuch as he believes it to be true in a twofold sense: according to the revelation of God as apprehended through religious faith and the study of the Bible and Christian tradition, and according to self-analysis in comparison to the revealed truths. He makes use of introspection, and finds that his own existential self acts and reacts within the structure of the "Biblical" view of man.[1]

The Christian view of man, then, is distinctive from alternative views in its interpretation and relation of three aspects of man's existence:

> (1) It emphasizes the height of self-transcendence in man's spiritual stature in its doctrine of "image of God." (2) It insists on man's weakness, dependence and finiteness, on his involvement in the necessities and contingencies of the natural world, without, however, regarding this finiteness as, of itself, a source of evil in man. In its purest form the Christian view of man regards man as a unity of God-likeness and creatureliness in which he remains a creature even in the highest spiritual dimensions of his existence and may reveal elements of the image of God even in the lowliest aspects of his natural life. (3) It affirms that the evil in man is a consequence of his inevitable though not necessary unwillingness to acknowledge his dependence, to accept his finiteness and to admit his insecurity, an unwillingness which

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[1] See infra, "The Self in Dialogue" for further discussion of this analysis of selfhood.

> involves him in the vicious circle of accentuating the insecurity from which he seeks escape.[1]

This delineation of the Christian view of man perhaps seems quite abstract and irrelevant. But Niebuhr could never conceive it thusly. For him there is a definite concreteness to Christian truth, which causes it to have a distinct relevance for human situations and experiences.

Human creaturehood means, among other things, that all knowledge and all achievements of mankind are relative. This relativity is inescapable for creatures; it is an essential element of creaturehood. Relativity is not identical with sin, though it is bound up with man's sin. Relativity is an aspect of finitude whereby the self always has _itself_ as reference. All of the achievements and insights which the self attains are incomplete and imperfect because they are relative to the self or to some group. In Niebuhr's view, the Christian faith does not find relativity a thing to be denied or ignored, but rather accepts it as a truth or fact of life. But the Christian has resources of faith, which is also a fact of life, that enable him to get a glimpse beyond relativity, because that relativity is not final or complete.

Relativity and human reason

According to his analysis of human nature, Niebuhr regards the human personality as a self, a unity. In its situation of finiteness and freedom, the self is led through anxiety to attempt to escape the relativities in which it is caught. In his self-transcendence, man can see his situation for what it is, but this is intolerable for him. His situation is that his knowledge is relative and limited; it is not absolute and total. This transcendent realization tempts him to the "sin" of imagining that his knowledge is not relative, to a denial of his situation and thus to self-contradiction. Therefore he shuts his eyes to the limited scope of his own perspectives and pretends that it is not true. He attempts to escape the "peril of scepticism" and the "abyss of meaninglessness" which "yawns on the brink of all his mighty spiritual endeavors."[1] This Niebuhr sees as the source of all misguided and false absolutisms which are so evident in human thought.

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[1] _Human Nature_ (1941), p. 150.

A common pretension is the "ideological taint" associated with various kinds of rationalism. This involves the belief that human reason is the dominant aspect of human personality and the source and criterion of virtue. As Niebuhr understands it, reason is only one aspect of the total self, a self which sins at its very center and involves reason in its sin. Reason participates in sin along with the other aspects of the personality. "The perennial mistake of rationalists, whether Stoic, Catholic or modern, is to exempt reason from either finiteness or sin or both and to derive universal rational norms from this confidence in reason."[1]

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[1] Ibid., p. 182.

Rationalism (understood as this emphasis on the reasoning faculty) distorts the truth about man, in Niebuhr's view, in at least two ways. It overestimates the importance of the "coherence theory" of truth, to the extent that it "is tempted to make one known thing the principle of explanation and to derive all other things from it." And, as Niebuhr dryly remarks, "its most natural inclination is to make itself that ultimate principle, and thus in effect to declare itself God."[2] The second way in which rationalism distorts truth is in its identification of meaning with pure rationality. Niebuhr contends that the laws of reason and logic are not capable of full comprehension of the totality of meaning in the world. To identify meaning and reason is to ignore the fact that life and history are filled with alogical and contradictory truths.

> Every effort to identify meaning with rationality implies the deification of reason. That such an identification represents idolatry and that the laws of reason and logic are incapable of fully comprehending the total meaning of the world, is attested

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 284.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

> by the fact that life and history are full of contradictions which cannot be resolved in terms of rational principles. Furthermore a mind which transcends itself cannot legitimately make itself the ultimate principle of interpretation by which it explains the relation of mind to the world.[1]

So in effect, the position of rationalism is a position of "idolatry" which constitutes a worship of that which is less than ultimate.

The role of reason in human history is full of ambiguities, says Niebuhr. It is "both the servant and the master of all of history's vitalities."[2] The idolatrous aspects of rationalism are especially evident whenever reason is made to be the principle of virtue in man. In actuality, according to Niebuhr, reason is definitely limited in the area of morals, because of its being subservient to the larger self which is not entirely controlled by its rational faculty. He stresses the persistence and the force of the "egoistic impulse" which can and does override rational coolness in many ethical situations.

This does not mean that he is unwilling to recognize the place of reason in the formation and administration of ethical ideals, however. It is because reason can be "something more than a weapon of self-interest" as well as an idolatrous principle of rationalism which makes its ethical role so ambiguous and which makes the idolatry so plausible and "reasonable." Reason can indeed be an instrument of justice. It can discover and manufacture high idealisms which are of considerable value to moral conduct as well as to ethical theory. Niebuhr emphasizes the importance of reason at this point by showing that "Christianity as a whole always had to borrow from some scheme of rationalism to complete its ethical structure. The early Church borrowed from Stoicism and Thomasian Catholicism appropriated Aristotelian doctrine to provide a foundation for its more distinctively Christian superstructure."[1] Reason contributes to moral norms and to criticisms of human conduct in relation to those norms.

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 165.

[2] Reinhold Niebuhr, "A Faith to Live By--I. The Dilemma of Modern Man," *Nation*, CLXIV (February 22, 1947), p. 207. Cited also in *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics: His Political Philosophy and Its Application to Our Age as Expressed in His Writings*, ed. Harry R. Davis and Robert C. Good (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), p. 61. Future references to this work will be to "Davis and Good."

But the trouble with rationalism in ethics is that it fails to take into account the sub-rational social impulses which are more deeply rooted than is reason, and also that it is unable, in itself, to supply the moral dynamic which

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1. Reinhold Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (Living Age Books"; New York: Meridian Books, 5th printing 1959), p. 185. First published by Harper and Brothers in 1935.

would make adjustment to rational ideals possible.[1] It is one thing to fashion high moral ideals and prescribe methods for their implementation, but it is another to create moral conduct in the realization of the ideals and obedience to the rules. "There is no magic in either logic or the scientific method which will coerce men or nations to subordinate the particular to the universal interest or to correct the partial by a more universal insight."[2] Reason can never be disassociated from the other aspects of human personality, the "vitalities" which continue to have their effect even in the most "unreasonable" of human lives.

Niebuhr's interpretation of "Biblical" faith contains the proposition that the root of human evil is "in the self and not in the mind or in the body."[3] This is to deny the rationalistic view that evil springs from the bodily vitalities as well as to deny the opposite theory that evil lies somehow in the rational faculty itself. Reason is morally neutral, as it were. It is an instrument which can be used for either justice or injustice, good or evil.

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[1] See Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932), p. 26. Also cf. ibid.

[2] Davis and Good, p. 61.

[3] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism," in Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought, ed. Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall ("The Library of Living Theology," Vol. II; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956), p. 447. Future references to this volume will be made as "Kegley and Bretall."

> The forms, unities and patterns of human reason are themselves involved in historical relativity according to Christianity. The pretension that they are not, is, in the view of Christian faith, one of the primary proofs of the sinfulness of the human spirit which, in its pride, claims unconditioned validity for its systems of logical coherence and rational unities.[1]

Reason is but a faculty of the "self," and the self has possibilities for both good and evil in which its faculty of reason participates.

Niebuhr includes "scientific method" in the category of rational idolatry. He regards much of modern "empiricism,"[2] which makes much of its scientific methodology, as not truly empirical, since it is "blind to some very obvious 'facts.'" He refers here to modern empirical culture in general, which, according to his interpretation, follows traditional scientific empiricism in recognizing only sense data as facts. And of course, only these sense-data facts are admitted to the arena of truth and knowledge. Niebuhr, however, would admit introspective "realities" to this arena, realities such as "the self's freedom, the self-corruption of that freedom in self-concern, . . . the self's 'historical' character."

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1. Human Nature (1941), p. 29.

2. Niebuhr of course recognizes the traditional philosophical distinction between "rationalism" and "empiricism." But he considers the two disparate positions to be alike in respect to their emphasis on the mental faculty and their rejection of the religious insight that evil arises from a source other than a defect in reason or a lack of knowledge acquired.

These "facts" cannot of course be submitted as sense data according to traditional sense-related empiricism but they do have validity, says Niebuhr, in that they are "the kind of facts with which the average man must deal daily."[1] And if these maverick facts are admitted as true knowledge, the picture is vastly changed. The whole estimate of correct thinking and logic may need revision, because "loyalty to all the facts may require a provisional defiance of logic, lest complexity in the facts of experience be denied for the sake of a premature logical consistency."[2] In reality, the whole structure of modern "empirical culture" is called into question, for the exclusiveness of its principle of divining truth is denied. Niebuhr doesn't press this attack further, but does use this means to secure recognition as knowledge for the various "existential" facts which any individual can observe within himself and in his activities. Niebuhr's purpose here is not to destroy empiricism as used with great success in various scientific applications, for he himself is an empiricist, of sorts. But his attack serves to broaden the scope of empiricism to allow for his own experiential interpretation of human nature.

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[1] For a discussion of these ideas, see Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), pp. 127-128.

[2] *Human Nature* (1941), p. 263.

So the frame of meaning which derives from sense perception alone is, in Niebuhr's view, simply inadequate. The so-called "scientific method," which in Western culture is widely believed to be concerned for only "the facts," is inadequate by itself, because it arbitrarily cuts off the most important facts of all: those having to do with human personality in its inner awareness. Niebuhr believes the inner facts to be equally as valid and true as are those of the self in its outward adjustments and relationships and activities. The purely scientific frame of meaning assumes that any information which is not verifiable or falsifiable through "empirical" (sense data) investigation is without meaning. Niebuhr attributes this situation to the development of "ontological presuppositions" which have become dominant within a justified empirical approach to the natural order. Thus "it becomes impossible to be genuinely empirical about the facts of a different order which do not fit into the ontological presuppositions."[1]

The basic attitudes of naturalism together with this arbitrarily-imposed method of acquiring truth, combine to prescribe definite and fixed limits to the empiricistic frame of meaning. Niebuhr devotes some of his sharpest refutation

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1. The Self and the Dramas of History (1955), pp. 110-111.

to the various "naturalistic" philosophies which regard man as wholly a part of the natural order and wholly understandable through the pursuit of such naturalistic studies as psychology and sociology. As has already been seen, such philosophies contrast directly with Niebuhr's own estimate of the "nature" of man as being transcendent as well as a part of the natural order. He regards as erroneous such naturalistic identifications as that of history with nature, that of human thought and activity with the workings of natural laws, that of the study of human culture (in principle and method) with natural science.[1]

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[1] Niebuhr develops this stricture in ibid., 115. "An 'empirical' culture was not prepared to deal with the problem of wide, rather than specific, conceptual schemes, that is, with presuppositions of inquiry which referred not to a specific type of being under scrutiny, but with the very character of being itself. Ideally these conceptual schemes were subject to re-examination; but practically they proved themselves powerful enough to determine the evidence by which they were supposed to be tested. Thus Professor John Dewey, the most typical of modern naturalistic philosophers, never tired of insisting that the 'experimental method' must be rigorous enough to re-examine its own hypotheses. But it never occurred to him that his insistence that the "methods of science" could be transferred from the field of nature to that of history, and that only the intrusion of irrelevant religious and political authority prevented this consumation, rested upon an erroneous and, unexamined presupposition. That was the universally held belief of modern culture that the realm of history was essentially identical with the realm of nature."

Of particular offense to Niebuhr in his understanding of man has been the effort of the naturalistic philosophies (and such sciences as psychology and sociology) to know man from an "objective" standpoint which would be free from the "illusions" of ideology and/or religion. He insists that this effort is fruitless and leads to a misunderstanding rather than to an understanding of man because it refuses to consider (indeed, its spectacles of "empiricism" do not allow it to perceive) the spiritual dimensions.

> Either the full dimension of man's spirit is not recognized and he is reduced to the level of nature's forms of life; or his spirit is obscured; or the spiritual dimension of human existence is falsely regarded as virtuous and it is not recognized that the worst forms of human wrongdoing are spiritual; or the spiritual character of evil is recognized and falsely identified with "religion" and salvation is promised through the decay of religion.[1]

This results not only in misunderstanding, but in an irrelevance which Niebuhr believes is repeatedly being demonstrated in the complexities and paradoxes of our times.

> The wise men of our day insist that human nature is flat. They run about with little measurements which can measure whatever is irrelevant but do not touch the heights and depths which are relevant. If we should ever fall into the deep abyss of an atomic conflict, we may be quite certain that on the night before the conflict begins some psychological association will bestow a medal upon an outstanding scientist for having found a key to the problem of eliminating aggressiveness from human life.[2]

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[1] Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Blind Leaders," Christianity and Society, Vol. XIV (Spring, 1949), pp. 5-6. Cited in Davis and Good, p. 62.

[2] Ibid., p. 6.

At this point also, Niebuhr would refute the various theories of cultural relativism, which he ascribes to"modern anthropology." Cultural relativism, he shows, is too rigorously deterministic, making of man completely the creature of his culture, without a freedom to choose and to transcend his culture. The deterministic assumptions are an arbitrary blindness, in his view, and cultural relativism has not demonstrated how it is possible, within its own frame of understanding to learn anything at all.[1] For Niebuhr, relativism is tantamount to, or walks on the brink of, a complete absence of meaning.

The self in dialogue: relativity and history

In *The Self and the Dramas of History*, Niebuhr insists that there is an empirically-discernable human self, even though it by definition must elude the techniques of "scientific method" as based on the ontological presuppositions of naturalism. This "free and responsible self . . . may be known in introspection and in dramatic encounter but not by methods of empiricism which make the self an 'object' of empirical inquiry." Niebuhr would not dissociate the self from either its "organism" or its "perceptual responses" (its mind). But neither would he identify the self with either or both of these in combination. He insists that the self knows itself as transcendent, empirically and subjectively.[1]

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[1] See *The Self and the Dramas of History* (1935), p. 132.

The self is to be defined as "a creature which is in constant dialogue with itself, with its neighbors, and with God." This is Niebuhr's interpretation of the biblical viewpoint of the human personality. But though it is essentially understood through a proper knowledge of revelation, it likewise is consonant with a man's truest, most honest account of his own selfhood. The three dialogues in which the self participates are held to be empirically verifiable.

> (A) The dialogue of the self with itself is an empiric fact in the sense that every astute person must admit that such a dialogue goes on in the internal life of the self, though there are no external evidences of this dialogue. This internal dialogue is a more significant testimony of the self's freedom over nature than its endowment with conceptual capacities, though these are frequent instruments of the self in the dialogue.
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> (B) The self is in constant dialogue with various neighbors. This may be a quality which Aristotle was partly describing by defining the self as a *zoon politicon*. But that definition would not necessarily do justice to the endless nuances and levels of the dialogue of the self with others. It is not merely dependent upon others for its sustenance and security. It is dependent upon them for the image which it has of itself and for the spiritual security which is as necessary to the self as its social security.
>
> (C) The self is in dialogue with God. . . . Let us . . . make some at least preliminary concessions to the spirit of contemporary empiricism and say merely that the self imagines itself in an encounter with the divine. For surely the persistence of this imagination is an empirical datum about the self. Perhaps we can

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1. See *ibid*., pp. 129-130.

> be even more moderate and declare that the self distinguishes itself by a yearning for the ultimate. For if we omit this characteristic we have failed to define the total anatomy of human selfhood.[1]

In other words, introspective self-knowledge is held to be valid knowledge of the self, properly fitting the criterion of empiricism and meeting certain other rationalistic criteria, but failing at the point of the expected public nature of experiential fact. And yet, even here, Niebuhr makes an appeal to factuality, suggesting that if only one is properly "astute" he will have to admit the presence of the internal dialogues as well as the external ones.

The dialogues in which the self is engaged are complex. The internal dialogue involves two distinct selves or persons. Rather, these are two foci of the same self. Niebuhr holds that the self is in fundamental unity, though there are various "personae" which may be distinguished in one's empirical notations regarding himself.[2]

The internal dialogue between the self's will (the self as organized for a purpose) and conscience (the self's capacity to view itself, with its aspect of obligation), for instance, is especially important here inasmuch as in this dialogue is involved the question of ethical decision and behavior. Niebuhr regards the sense of obligation as universal, that is, all normal individual selves do experience a sense of obligation in viewing themselves. Conscience as an aspect of the self is universal, but of course, the *content* of any given conscience is relative to time and place. "The minimal terms of our obligations to our neighbors, incorporated, for instance, in the prohibition of murder, theft, and adultery, are fairly universal."[1] Explicit formulations of "moral law" are not absolute, for they derive their validity through social usage. But moral laws are also based in individual consciousness, being "derived from intuitions of the self about the essential nature of its selfhood." The self has a "law" written into its nature. This law is the sense of obligation which is recognized in the internal dialogue and is relative, of course, to environmental or cultural situations. But even though ~~the~~ "moral law" is extremely relative, because socially derived, there is an element of the self, resident in the essential obligation experienced in the conscience, which defies one's community. The self is *master*, not servant, of its reason, although it is through reason that the self adjusts to the relativities and contingencies of culture.[2]

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[1] Ibid., pp. 4-5.

[2] Cf. ibid., p. 11. See the entire discussion in chap. 2 of ibid.

Also within the internal dialogue of selfhood Niebuhr discovers that universal characteristic of the self, "original sin," which he describes as "the universal inclination of the self to be more concerned with itself than to be embarrassed by its undue claims."[1]

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

[2] See *ibid*.

At the point where the self's dialogues become actual, says Niebuhr, they become historical dramas. History is ambiguous, as the self is ambiguous. The self creates historical events, in its freedom over the processes of nature and in its capacity to contemplate the past through memory and to project goals into the future. But since the self also participates in the eventualities of history it cannot be simply creator of those events. It is therefore the creature, as well as the creator of history. And history in its dramas is both creator of, and created by the human self.[2]

The dramas of history overlap, making for a very complex type of causation. So Niebuhr takes a skeptical position toward seeing patterns in history "in terms of either natural or ontological necessity."[3] History, or historiography, is by necessity an inexact science, because the patterns which it "discovers" or "projects" in history must fall short of the test of predictability which characterizes the conclusions reached by natural science. Scientific investigations

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1. Ibid., p. 18.

2. See ibid., p. 41.

3. Ibid., p. 45.

of past behavior cannot with great precision be made the basis of predicting future or present behavior. The free self and dramatic history are an embarrassment to scientific historiography. Patterns may be seen only by falsifying the facts.[1]

There is therefore no absolute criterion of truth, no infallible formal development to be found in history as such. History is a relative "drama," in which causation and patterning are problematic. But this is not sufficient basis for classifying history as "bunk" or devaluating it as "meaningless," in Niebuhr's opinion. History is complex and dramatic, but therefore it is the more challenging. His skepticism about historical patterns is clearly aimed, not at the views of history which may be gained through perspectives of faith, but rather at those "assured" patterns according to which there is inevitable progress or in which man is certainly and gradually gaining complete control over historical processes. In short, history is not nature, and whereas man, in the biblical view, is given control over nature, this is not true of his relation to history.

Niebuhr traces what he considers to be the mistaken identification of nature and history to the "classical" or Hellenic elements in our culture. He feels that the ancient

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[1] See _ibid._, pp. 44-49.

Greeks were responsible for two "misunderstandings" concerning human selfhood and history. One of these was the identification of the self with mind or rationality, and the other was that history proceeds according to a rational and ontological pattern.[1] Modern culture has largely followed the Greeks in this, according to the effort to understand man as a part of nature. Niebuhr believes that the Hebraic components in the Renaissance and Reformation, though now largely rejected by modern culture, were actually more empirical and therefore more desirable for a true knowledge of history and the self.

> The Hebraic tradition, which is allegedly more crude and less rational, is relegated to the sphere of "pre-scientific" or "pre-philosophical" thought. It is, despite these prejudices, more "empirical" than the Greek tradition. Its superior empirical accuracy consists in its understanding of the wholeness of the human self in body, mind and soul, in the appreciation of the dramatic variety of the self's encounters with other selves in history, and in the discontinuity between the self and God. The self feels itself in dialogue with God.[2]

Modern naturalism, following the Greek rather than the Hebrew lead, tends to falsify the dramas of history, by denying human freedom, and by identifying history with natural "process." For moderns are "steeped . . . in evolutionary optimism," believing that inevitably the world is getting better because of the principle of progress which operates in all of nature, including man. To such optimists, Niebuhr's realism appears as a morbid pessimism, for he denies the progressive principle, insisting that "the possibilities of evil grow with the possibilities of good, and that human history is therefore not so much a chronicle of the progressive victory of the good over evil, of cosmos over chaos, as the story of an ever increasing cosmos, creating ever increasing possibilities of chaos."[1]

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[1] See ibid., chap. 13.

[2] Ibid., p. 84.

So for Niebuhr, historical relativity is a fact, and also a problem, in contemporary culture. An individual, also a nation or a culture, is inevitably involved in "the mutabilities of history." Therefore it is a problem how an individual or a group which is a part of historical flux can see beyond himself/itself well enough to perceive and record patterns or to chart meaningfully the sweep of historical events. Any such pattern or record is itself but a part of the sweep, a most contingent circumstance of the very history which it purports to describe.

> The modern man lacks the humility to accept the fact that the whole drama of history is enacted in a frame of meaning too large for human comprehension or management. It is a drama in which fragmentary meanings can be discerned within a penumbra of mystery; and in which specific duties and responsibilities can be undertaken within a vast web of relations which are beyond our powers.

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[1] An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935), p. 92.

> A sane life requires that we have some clues to the mystery so that the realm of meaning is not simply reduced to the comprehensible processes of nature. But these clues are ascertained by faith, which modern man has lost. So he hovers ambivalently between subjection to the 'reason' which he can find in nature and the 'reason' which he can impose upon nature. But neither form of reason is adequate for the comprehension of the illogical and contradictory patterns of the historic drama, and for anticipating the emergence of unpredictable virtues and vices. In either case, man as the spectator and manager of history imagines himself to be freer of the drama he beholds than he really is; and man as the creature of history is too simply reduced to the status of a creature of nature, and all of his contacts to the ultimate are destroyed.[1]

Niebuhr finds an answer for the problem which historical relativity poses, however, in his understanding that the human mind constructs patterns in its search for meaning beyond itself. For the mind "in both its structure and in its capacities of observation has a vantage point over the flux of historical events." So valid historical knowledge is a possibility, given the self-transcendent (though never wholly "objective") perspective from which one can observe the very sweep of history of which he himself is a part. But this vantage point can never be wholly transcendent; it always stems from some particular locus. Thus again we must contemplate the ambiguity of man in his situation. Any pretension to absoluteness in judging history Niebuhr regards as an "aspect of the 'original sin' which infects all human culture."[2]

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1. Reinhold Niebuhr, The Irony of American History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), p. 88.

2. See Reinhold Niebuhr, Faith and History: A Comparison of

In Faith and History, Niebuhr describes the "problem of historical relativism" as

> how a man, nation, or culture involved in the mutabilities of history can achieve a sufficiently high vantage point of wisdom and disinterestedness to chart the events of history, without using a framework of meaning which is conditioned by contingent circumstances of the class, nation, or period of the observer.[1]

This is indeed one of the major aspects of "relativism" which is of concern in this study. Niebuhr understands that "relativism" is a problem which must be solved or overcome. This is also the way in which the term is used herein. The term "relativity" is used descriptively, however, as indicative of the factual nature of human thought and history, distinct from any problems which that relativity may entail for the historian or the thinker in ethics. "Relativity" is factual. "Relativism" is both a problem and, as ethically conceived, an inadequate position for achieving satisfactory solutions in life, according to Niebuhr.

Historical science and philosophy can indeed improve human culture by trying to make the observer of culture "objective." But any scheme implies a precedent and preconceived (or implicitly held) frame of meaning. There is at

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Christian and Modern Views of History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), pp. 116-118.

[1] Ibid., p. 116.

least an implied deduction necessitated in any historical study, no matter how empirical and inductive the method may be. Niebuhr believes that the comprehensive study of history reveals that such frames of meaning are faith-derived, having reference to some "ultimate presuppositions."[1]

Because of its position of leadership in the free world, America comes in for considerable admonition from Niebuhr. He is convinced that America (The United States) is deficient in its overall goals and perspectives, and is following a naturalistically-imposed course. For America imagines that historical destiny is totally under the dominion of man, whereas all of the lessons and experiences of that history should have taught us that this view is illusory.

> Our dreams of bringing the whole human history under the control of the human will are ironically refuted by the fact that no group of idealists can easily move the pattern of history toward the desired goal of peace and justice. The recalcitrant forces in the historical drama have a power and persistence beyond our reckoning. Our own nation, always a vivid symbol of the most characteristic attitudes of a bourgeois culture, is less potent to do what it wants in the hour of its greatest strength than it was in the days of its infancy. The infant is more secure in his world than the mature man is in his wider world. The pattern of the historical drama grows more quickly than the strength of even the most powerful man or nation.[2]

Men, in their exaltation of reason and their optimism concerning science-led progress, imagine that they have discerned

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1. See ibid., pp. 118-119.

2. The Irony of American History (1952), pp. 2-3.

the true end of history. From hence come utopian theories of many an ilk.[1]

The various utopian theories, in Niebuhr's estimate, are illusions which need to be sloughed off, if America or any other contemporary culture is going to be successful in giving moral leadership during our current crisis in meaning and politics.

> The irony of America's quest for happiness lies in the fact that she succeeded more obviously than any other nation in making life "comfortable," only finally to run into larger incongruities of human destiny by the same achievements by which it escaped the smaller ones. Thus we tried too simply to make sense out of life, striving for harmonies between man and nature and man and society and man and his ultimate destiny, which have provisional but no ultimate validity. Our very success in this enterprise has hastened the exposure of its final limits.[2]

In his viewpoint, the historical "processes" are never purely moral, as many political and social liberals have assumed, since "the equilibria of power never correspond exactly to the necessities of justice."[3] Nature in its processes does not determine human morals. Morals belong rather to the area of the historical, with its dramas in which human selves participate, and which is exceedingly intricate and complex. Niebuhr has given considerable effort to the attempt to

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1. See The Self and the Dramas of History (1955), chap. 22.

2. The Irony of American History (1952), p. 63.

3. Faith and History (1949), p. 129.

expose the "illusions" of modern democratic and religious liberalism, not because he is anti-liberal (he is not), but because he discerns that such liberalism is largely charting the course for contemporary social and political theory.

This liberalism Niebuhr considers to be inadequate because of its naïveté and over-optimism. It is not only inadequate, but it can be highly dangerous in an age which demands realistic assessments of truth and realistic decisions for action. Liberalism believes that it is possible simply to determine by use of reason what best will benefit modern society and then to implement this scientifically-derived knowledge in human affairs through education and moral suasion. The fact that this belief is partially justified only adds to the illusion and compounds the problematic nature of the situation, since more "realistic" solutions are thereby obviated.

> What is lacking among all . . . moralists, whether religious or rational, is an understanding of the brutal character of the behavior of all human collectives, and the power of self-interest and collective egoism in all inter-group relations. Failure to recognise the stubborn resistance of group egoism to all moral and inclusive social objectives inevitably involves them in unrealistic and confused political thought. They regard social conflict either as an impossible method of achieving morally approved ends or as a momentary expedient which a more perfect education or a purer religion will make unnecessary. They do not see that the limitations of the human imagination, the easy subservience of reason to prejudice and passion, and the consequent persistence of

> irrational egoism, particularly in group behavior, make social conflict an inevitability in human history, probably to its very end.[1]

Modern social and political and religious liberalism has followed the Renaissance, according to Niebuhr, in "the provisional understanding of the relativity of human knowledge, including the relativity of various interpretations of religious revelation."[2] There abounds a willingness to entertain views other than one's own, and a readiness to be tolerant of opposing theories. But Niebuhr shows that toleration can be a problem in itself, inasmuch as the ability to be tolerant carries no guarantees that the tolerant one has any convictions. It is at this point that modern culture has difficulties. Liberalism, which often shows great tolerance for opposing political and social viewpoints, often exhibits few if any real convictions of its own. Consequently it finds little basis for responsible action and has little ability to discriminate between "irresponsibility and scepticism on the one hand and new fanaticisms on the other."[3] Niebuhr feels that this liberal outlook and hope rest on the rather vague confidence that history is self-redemptive, that change is good in itself. This is specifically what Niebuhr, on the basis of his own experience and study of history, denies to be true.

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[1] Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932), p. xx.

[2] The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. II, Human Destiny (1943), p. 236. Future references to this volume will be made as "Human Destiny."

[3] Ibid.

Skepticism, nihilism, and relativism are moral and spiritual dangers which Niebuhr would avoid at all costs in an attempt to understand human nature and culture. History is full of relativities and human knowledge is relative. But for Niebuhr the fact of the relativity of our situation and our knowledge does not mean that we must abandon ourselves to relativism in our moral and mental outlook. In his analysis of the similarities between ancient and modern societies,[1] he searches out certain "constant tendencies" which would bind history together meaningfully, and thus avoid complete meaninglessness. For example, two of these are that "order must always remain the first value of any community," (because disorder or chaos is tantamount to nonexistence, for a community), and that human nature does not change its "inclination on the one hand to seek a norm, transcending the ideological taints of interest observable in all historical norms, but then promptly to claim some special affinity with the transcendent norm."[2] This delineation of societal tendencies provides one aspect of Niebuhr's solution of the problem of the relative and the absolute in history.

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[1] Reinhold Niebuhr, _The Structure of Nations and Empires: A study of the Recurring Patterns and Problems of the Political Order in Relation to the Unique Problems of the Nuclear Age_ (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959).

[2] _Ibid_.. pp. 5-6.

Niebuhr wishes to avoid the conclusions of ethical relativism, even while acknowledging the relativity of all historical moral solutions, because he believes that moral relativism is on the edge of the "abyss of moral nihilism." At least this is the case when relativists choose to disregard what Niebuhr considers to be some "permanent factors in the human situation." He sees the issue as a debate between ethical "legalists" and ethical "relativists," either side making extreme claims for its position, claims which warp and twist the truth which each holds only provisionally and paradoxically.[1] Modern culture is predominantly relativistic, not only in the sense that the relativities of historical knowledge are recognized, but in the sense of relativism itself, in which it is concluded that there are really no moral absolutes by which men can judge their own lives and decisions. And relativists now have a distinct advantage in intellectual discussion, Niebuhr observes, due to the insights of historical science and scientific techniques which operate upon the presupposition that there are no absolutes given at the beginning of discourse, but that true knowledge must be built up inductively by dint of observation and analysis of derived facts. Relativism challenges "legalism" at the point of showing that said legalism has laws that are too inflexible and that the legalist norms of justice are too often the "rationalization of the interests of one party to the dispute which the standard is to adjudicate." These contentions are of course easily justified, especially according to relativist (empiricist) presuppositions.[1] The skeptical method of questioning the givenness of principles of truth for deduction and doubting even the criterion of truth is a telling method, one which, if accepted (and Niebuhr accepts it provisionally) always gives the advantage to the skeptic.

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[1] Cf. Faith and History (1949), pp. 171-173.

In the face of the factuality of ethical relativity, Niebuhr wishes to deny the efficacy and the truth of ethical relativism through asserting that there is a moral and spiritual meaning which is larger and more transcendent than human reason is able of itself to discover. Thus in "Biblical faith," which for Niebuhr means faith in God as transcending the natural order, is to be found meaning which is relevant to all of our partial and fragmentary historical meanings. Furthermore, Niebuhr believes that a true empiricism can justify such faith, that actual experience which does not obscure man's self-understanding can substantiate a faith which gives meaning to our whole cultural history.[2] The religious inclination is derived from the self's freedom over its rational faculties. The self must be allowed to commit itself to a meaning, or rather, to a God. Niebuhr contends that the "ultimate or divine mystery" is the key to self-transcendent freedom. The whole of Niebuhr's ethical thought reflects in some way or other his conviction that the truest and most helpful frame of meaning is that in which the self is in dialogue with God.[1]

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[1] Cf. ibid., p. 186.

[2] See The Self and the Dramas of History (1955), pp. 65-67.

ii Relativity in Social and Political Life

The search for social justice

The greater part of Niebuhr's ethical writings deal not with the personal moral problems and decisions of individuals but with the even more complex areas of social intercourse. He is an ethical idealist, holding forth the Christian gospel of love as a relevant social and political ideal which can be of real pragmatic value in group and national and even international life.[2] He is also an ethical realist, stressing the impossibility of directly implementing a social ideal which places the onus for achieving social justice upon the good intentions of individual members or groups within the human race. But he firmly holds that social ideals are necessary and that, though they can never be implemented fully, they can be approximated, even in the complexities of social relationships. The central question with which he deals in this connection seems to be how the necessary social ideals can be approximated without entailing unnecessary injustices into the bargain.

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[1] *Ibid.*, see chap. 12.

[2] By "idealism" here is meant the ethical notion that it is possible to discover "ideals" or ethical goals or reference points which give meaning to the quest for order and reality. Idealism is to be associated with "ideology," though not identified with it, as an ideal may not be a rational idea as such but perhaps a kind of perfect or ultimate or absolute obligation, as in the case of the Christian "ideal" of love. There is no necessary connection to the technical philosophical usage of the word "idealism," in terms of the epistemological subject or object, but of course there may be conjunction of

Strictly speaking, it is a question whether Niebuhr has a "social ethic." He sees that the locus of ethical behavior lies in individuals. And he shows that the Christian ethical ideal is meant for individual application. But he believes that the individualistic ideal is nonetheless applicable to social decisions.

> There is indeed a very rigorous ethical ideal in the gospel of Jesus, but there is no social ethic in the ordinary sense of the word in it, precisely because the ethical ideal is too rigorous and perfect to lend itself to application in the economic and political problems of our day. . . .
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> The ethic of Jesus was, to begin with, a personal ethic. It was not individual in the sense that he

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the two uses in Niebuhr, and it might successfully be argued that he is an idealist in some technical philosophical sense. The term "realist" as used in this paragraph, and generally elsewhere in reference to Niebuhr's thought, is to be understood according to the context, as a kind of awareness and facing of facts.

> believed in individual perfection abstracted from a social situation. . . . His ethic was an ethic of love, and it therefore implied social relationships. But it was an individual ethic in the sense that his chief interest was in the quality of life of an individual.[1]

He makes this fundamental distinction, but holds that it means only that an absolutist ethic which is perhaps applicable to the lives of individuals cannot be applied directly to inter-group relations.[2] In practice the distinction can be ignored, except inasmuch as it helps rid us of social or ideological illusions. Society is evidently viewed, in Niebuhr's ethical considerations, as a kind of exaggerated individual. His articles and books are filled with phrases in which he represents societies and nations and groups as having a collective mind, with a collective ability to make decisions, be moral, and so forth.

But Niebuhr does not hold that societies have an exaggerated capacity to do the type of good which is possible for individuals. Societies have exaggerated individual capacities, but these capacities are for evil, rather than good. This is the thesis of his *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, that the human tendency to sin is perpetuated and elaborated

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1. From Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Ethic of Jesus and the Social Problem," *Religion in Life*, I (Spring, 1932), pp. 198-209. Republished in *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. D. B. Robertson (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), p. 30.

2. *Ibid*.

in social configurations. For individuals, it is possible to consider the interests of others before the interests of the self (though in fact, individuals do not usually do this). Individuals

> are endowed by nature with a measure of sympathy and consideration for their kind, the breadth of which may be extended by an astute social pedagogy. Their rational faculty prompts them to a sense of justice which educational discipline may refine and purge of egoistic elements until they are able to view a social situation, in which their own interests are involved, with a fair measure of objectivity.[1]

But it is "more difficult, if not impossible" for social groups to think and act in this way.[2]

Niebuhr recognizes fully the extent to which human knowledge and decision are involved in relativity. But the relativity which he envisages is the result of human partiality and incompleteness, compounded by sin. It is not a relativity born of the atomistic aloneness of individual thought and action and perpetuated because of the impossibility for the isolated human atoms to communicate meaningfully. In ethics, Niebuhr is a conceptualist, if not a realist.[3]

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[1] Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932), p. xi. Cf. p. xii.

[2] What Niebuhr probably means is that it is more difficult, if not impossible, for individuals acting in a responsible position for the welfare of a society to think and act in this way, for the interests and welfare of others cannot very well be sacrificed.

[3] "Conceptualist" and "realist" are used here specifically in reference to the question of the epistemological and ontological status of ethical "universals."

Societies can think and act as do individuals, and ethical ideals are very real indeed, because they are capable of producing pragmatic effects for good, even within a society which itself is incapable of unselfishly doing the good. The necessity of social coercion is obvious here, and Niebuhr makes much of this fact: "We need a great deal of second-rate goodness to get along with one another."[1] "The social struggle involves a violation of a pure ethic of love, not only in the assertion of rights, but in the inevitable use of coercion."[2]

The difficulty or impossibility for societies to act "morally" is acknowledged also in that the limits of reason which are so evident in individuals are even more evident in societies.

> The limits of reason make it inevitable that pure moral action, particularly in the intricate, complex and collective relationships, should be an impossible goal. . . . The proportion of reason to impulse becomes increasingly negative when we proceed from the life of individuals to that of social groups, among whom a common mind and purpose is always more or less inchoate and transitory, and who depend therefore upon a common impulse to bind them together.[3]

These considerations belie the optimism of modern educators

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1. From Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Spirit of Justice," Christianity and Society (Fall, 1950). Republished in Love and Justice, p. 26.

2. Love and Justice (article 1932), p. 35.

3. Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932), pp. 34-35.

who believe that through education social injustice can progressively be eliminated. The egoism of individuals, and particularly of groups, is not amenable simply to the stricture of an enlightened reason.[1] The social conflict[2] can of course be served and "mitigated" through the use of reason and moral suasion. But it can never be abolished in history, due to "the inevitable limitations of human nature and the limits of the human imagination and intelligence."[3]

With the inevitability of social conflict comes the necessity that the conflict be "mitigated" through the use of force and coercion. Societies do not voluntarily sacrifice their interests for the sake of those of other societies. Those in positions of leadership cannot be ready to sacrifice the good of the society, since they are responsible for the welfare of other individuals in that society, and these individuals depend on the welfare of the society itself. But the exercise of power in achieving social welfare and justice in our world must be intelligent, not blind. Those who make decisions which affect the affairs of societies and nations need to use their power so that the balance of justice over injustice may be increased, rather than lessened. Since it is not possible simply to end the conflict through a stroke of power (that stroke itself is tainted with sin and injustice), it is important that power be used wisely and with reserve. All of this social wisdom, Niebuhr believes, requires the presence and use of social ethical ideals.

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[1] On this point Niebuhr refutes the naïveté of such educators as John Dewey, of whose theories he says (ibid., pp. xiii-xiv):

"The most persistent error of modern educators and moralists is the assumption that our social difficulties are due to the failure of the social sciences to keep pace with the physical sciences which have created our technological civilisation. . . . The real cause of social inertia, 'our predatory self-interest,' is mentioned only in passing without influencing his reasoning, and with no indication that he understands how much social conservatism is due to the economic interests of the owning classes. On the whole, social conservatism is ascribed to ignorance, a viewpoint which states only part of the truth and reveals the natural bias of the educator."

[2] In Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932), Niebuhr's special concern is for the "social struggle" as inspired by Marxist ideology. His own thought has modified considerably regarding Marxism since the 1930's, but the point made here still stands in his mature thought.

[3] Ibid., pp. xxiii-xxiv.

The greatest social ideal is that of justice.

> Since obedience to the absolute demands of love is impossible to natural man he must be restrained by an ideal less rigorous but nevertheless effective in preventing the strong from devouring the weak and from living in the anarchy of constant conflict. The law of justice is such an ideal. It is the moral ideal in a more negative form than the ideal of love. It demands not that the interests of the neighbor be affirmed but that interests of the self be restricted so that they will not infringe upon those of the neighbor. Furthermore it sanctions the coercive force of governments to restrain those who will not voluntarily abide by the rule of rational justice.[1]

Whereas an individual can strive to attain unselfishness, a society cannot do this, so must strive for a "tolerable" justice. Niebuhr believes that, to a limited extent at least, a society may "use means, such as self-assertion, resistance, coercion and perhaps resentment" in the pursuit of such justice, even though these means may offend the morally sensitive individual.

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[1] Reinhold Niebuhr, Reflections on the end of an Era (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), pp. 216-217.

> Society . . . makes justice rather than unselfishness its highest moral ideal. Its aim must be to seek equality of opportunity for all life. If this equality and justice cannot be achieved without the assertion of interest against interest, and without restraint upon the self-assertion of those who infringe upon the rights of their neighbors, then society is compelled to sanction self-assertion and restraint. It may even, as we have seen, be forced to sanction social conflict and violence.[1]

Niebuhr believes that justice is to be achieved through bringing about situations wherein the principle of "equality" is approximated. "A higher justice always means a more equal justice."[2] Equality is basically a rational principle. Niebuhr appeals to "the perpetual recurrence of the principle of equality in social theory."[1] But he also tries to establish it as a Christian principle. In a footnote refutation of Emil Brunner's doubts that equality can be justified as a Christian principle, Niebuhr cites as evidence of its transcendent validity the fact that children spontaneously accept the principle in demanding their rights. It is not clear just how this is supposed to establish the Christian foundations of the principle. But given his strictures against over-dependence on reason when deriving ethical principles and ideals, it follows that he should wish to derive it from some level of transcendent truth.[2]

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[1] Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932), pp. 258-259. Here again Niebuhr is speaking in his Marxist phase. In Love and Justice, (article 1932), p. 32, he describes the proper social ideal for "Christian Socialism" as "a combination of anarchism and communism dominated by the spirit of love." This radical political notion can now be balanced, in understanding his thinking, with his many second thoughts about Marxism, wherein the notions of love and justice are little changed in theory, but he no longer advocates a full-scale revolutionary action. He is still the social revolutionary, however, and urges that coercion be used to mitigate injustice (for example, civil rights injustice) wherever reason fails in this task.

[2] Human Destiny (1943), p. 254.

However, equality is a guiding principle and is not considered to be an absolute standard of justice.[3] Equality "points toward love as the final norm of justice; for equal justice is the approximation of brotherhood under the conditions of sin."[4] The further relationship of love and justice will be examined in a later stage of this study. One aspect of Niebuhr's conception of the relation of the relative and

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1. Ibid.

2. See ibid., pp. 254-256.

3. See Faith and History (1949), p. 190.

4. Human Destiny (1943), p. 254. In both Faith and History (1949) and Human Destiny Niebuhr expresses his belief that "equality" is a principle through which one may observe the distinction between the absolute and historical relativities.

the absolute can be seen in his comment on the implementation of social norms:

> The validity of the principle of equality on the one hand and the impossibility of realizing it fully on the other, illustrates the relation of absolute norms of justice to the relativities of history. The fact that one class will tend to emphasize the absolute validity of the norm unduly, while another class will be inclined to emphasize the impossibility of achieving it fully, illustrates the inevitable "ideological taint" in the application of a generally valid principle, even if the principle itself achieves a high measure of transcendence over partial interest.[1]

So the social ideal of equality is a valid principle, though its validity is complex and ambiguous because it is not fully realizable in the social situation in which it is so sorely needed. He feels that a dialectical understanding of justice enables one to refute both "relativists, who see no possibility of finding valid principles of justice, and the rationalists and optimists who imagine it possible to arrive at completely valid principles, free of every taint of special interest and historical passion."[2] Niebuhr's idealism, as well as his pragmatism, are apparent in this. There is a kind of Platonic transcendence which Niebuhr bestows on his ethical ideals. The ideals of equality and love "stand in an ascending scale of transcendence to the

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1. *Ibid.*, p. 255.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 256.

facts of existence."[1]

The milieu of perfect love would be a world in which all evil has been overcome. The law of love can only be approximated in the present world. Equality is a transcendent principle, but it does not reach the level of love because equality "presupposes competition of life with life and seeks to prevent this competition from resulting in exploitation, by advancing and defending the claims and interests of one life with equal force against every other life."[2] Equality is more relevant than love to social, economic and political situations because it involves law amid conflict, whereas love "transcends" all law.

So Niebuhr's ethical ideals are "guiding principles," ones which are relevant to real situations because in approximating the ideals concrete decisions for good can be made. But they are not absolute standards, for in the actual social situations there are too many contingent factors[3] that serve

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1. An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935), p. 136. Niebuhr has in one place refused to support his contentions in this work. See Kegley and Bretall (1956), pp. 434-435. It seems that his analysis of love and justice remains essentially constant, however, as described herein, and that this commentary in his 1935 work agrees in substance with thoughts expressed at subsequent intervals.

2. Ibid., pp. 135-136.

3. In "The Moral Question in International Relations," unpublished paper cited in Davis and Good, p. 177, Niebuhr says:

to complicate decision, making direct and unchangeable implementation of any principle impracticable if not impossible. This is Niebuhr's realistic viewpoint. As a social ideal, justice is a possible and general criterion of value, but it cannot be precise. Actual states of justice obtain only when men of wisdom and moral sense "guide the social struggle in such a way that the most stable and balanced equilibrium of social forces will be achieved and all life will thereby be given equal opportunities of development."[1]

Politics and morality

An integral part of Niebuhr's realistic approach to social and political ethics is his recognition of the necessity of power and coercion in attaining a "tolerable" justice in human affairs. A simple insistence on the New Testament command to "love one another,"[2] for instance, will not achieve justice because it is plain fact that men just do not love

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> "Historical contingencies must . . . determine whether order must be given preference over justice; and whether equality or liberty must be given preference in the norms of justice, and whether force or prestige should have larger emphasis in authority. Among these contingencies are, for example, the degree of danger to which a community may be exposed, requiring a more than ordinary abridgement of liberty; and the hierarchical necessities of communal integration requiring the qualification of equality."

[1] *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935), pp. 175-176.

[2] John 15:17.

each other and that they are not responsive to a simple moral command or admonition to love and do justice.[1] This is because love (in the Christian interpretation, at least) requires self-sacrifice, and men are not completely ready or able to sacrifice their own interests for the good of others. This is particularly true in social intercourse, where self-sacrifice becomes "impossible," since the social leader or political chief has to consider the interests of others--his own kind--when contemplating any sacrificial action. Niebuhr has found what he considers to be "irresponsibility" among those who are currently holding power in our society. These are not willing to let any moral suasion weaken their position of authority and control. Hence, there is obvious need for social and political coercion, so that a measure of "tolerable" justice can be achieved.

> No nation, race, or class sacrifices itself. Human groups make a virtue of the assertion of self-interest and will probably do so until the end of history. The best that can be expected of human groups is a wise rather than stupid self-interest. . . . The energies of intellectual and religious idealism must be bent to the purpose of achieving a sufficient measure of social idealism and intelligence to guarantee a minimum justice and fairness. Social pressure of various types will have to do the rest. The issue in our day is not between voluntary and coerced justice but between coerced justice and chaos.[2]

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[1] Cf. Faith and History (1949), pp. 183-184.

[2] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Moralists and Politics," The Christian Century (July 6, 1932); as cited in Essays in Applied Christianity, ed. D. B. Robertson ("Living Age Books"; New York: Meridian Books, 1959), p. 83.

But of course the introduction of coercive methods can in itself be a questionable action in the achievement of justice, for "these will always run the peril of introducing new forms of injustice in place of those abolished."[1] However, this danger must be risked. Niebuhr is a true revolutionary in this. He is willing to risk creating new injustice (in hopefully smaller amounts than already exists) in order to meliorate present flagrant injustices. Thus there is a place and a need for a certain amount of "absolutism" and fanaticism. Absolutism and fanaticism are degrees of commitment to ideological dogmas or goals. They result from one's having found at least a provisional meaning within social ambiguities and complexities, and they appear to be necessary for achieving change which is sorely needed. So in spite of his swareness that the social revolutionary has ideals which are *not* absolute, and indeed are tainted with sin, he finds that these very ideals are necessary in order for society to be moved to improve itself. For social inertia is greater, by inclination, than social adventurism, and it requires that immediate achievements be criticised by comparison to ideals if society is to be saved from complete relativism in morals. And complete relativism in morals is a condition which Niebuhr would if at all possible avoid.[2]

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[1] *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), p. 21.

[2] Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 222-223.

Thus there is a need for social absolutes. Niebuhr calls them "new illusions," which will have to be substituted for the old illusions upon which society now rests. Among the old illusions is the individualistic ethos of American society. It is a new illusion to believe that any "collective life of mankind" can achieve perfect justice. But in order to approximate a state of perfect justice, to redeem our society from its current "excesses and corruptions," the ideal is needed. "Justice cannot be approximated if the hope of its perfect realization does not generate a sublime madness in the soul." This is a dangerous doctrine~~,~~ as Niebuhr well realizes, because it encourages and allows "terrible fanaticisms" which will tempt man to use unethical means in bringing about an improved ethical situation.[1]

> Absolutism, in both religious and political idealism, is a splendid incentive to heroic action, but a dangerous guide in immediate and concrete situations. In religion it permits absurdities and in politics cruelties, which fail to achieve justifying consequences because the inertia of human nature remains a nemesis to the absolute ideal. . . . Societies risk the welfare of millions when they gamble for the attainment of the absolute. And, since coercion is an invariable instrument of their policy, absolutism transmutes this instrument into unbearable tyrannies and cruelties. The fanaticism which in the individual may appear in the guise of a harmless or pathetic vagary, when expressed in political policy, shuts the gates of mercy on mankind.[2]

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1. Ibid., p. 277.

2. Ibid., p. 199. Niebuhr appears to have realized the truth of this insight more fully as his thinking developed--especially the dangers of the fanaticism aroused by Marxist illusions.

Fanaticism and absolutism are the exclusive properties of neither the defender of the status quo nor the revolutionary.

Therefore it is necessary that reason be used. Reason is needed to keep fanaticism in check, and to restrain individual desires, which all too easily can be insinuated into social ideals and conflicts. There must therefore exist some rationally-derived "general principles of justice, which define the right order of life in a community."[1] No society could long endure solely under the influence of idealistic impulses. A community could not even exist as a community without the reasoned judgment which holds it together structurally and which prevents individuals from imposing simply arbitrary impulses onto the community at large. Niebuhr believes that all communities have a sort of "natural law" by which they judge the relativities of their history and their positive laws. Such natural law concepts must be the object of reasoned considerations, even though they in effect operate as social ideals, assuming "that there are more immutable and purer principles of justice than those actually embodied in its obviously relative laws."[2] The notion of natural law is currently unpopular largely because "the present stage of liberal democratic thought" in its relativistic assumptions, regards natural law as too fixed and absolute to be plausible in the 20th century. Niebuhr's attitude toward the notion of natural law seems to be ambivalent. He recognizes something of its values for the use of reason in preserving social stability as well as social change. But he is skeptical about direct applications of abstract and absolute laws to the relative and changing situations in which human beings find themselves.[1]

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[1] The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, (1944), p. 67.

[2] Ibid., p. 68.

The social and political milieu is filled with ambiguity and relativity. Current moral theory takes cognizance of this fact, and ethical relativism is a live option in our society. Social conflict is unavoidable, and the means for bringing justice into this situation must be political. There is need for power and coercion, tempered with rational control and restraint. Relativity is apparent, however, even in the idealistic notions of love and brotherhood. The "Scylla of despotism and the Charybdis of anarchy" are difficult to avoid--so difficult, prohesies Niebuhr, that "the dream of perpetual peace and brotherhood for human society is one which will never be fully realized."[2] On the American political scene, there exist various political "creeds," which tend to measure political realities in comparison with purely ideal possibilities rather than possible historical alternatives. These "creeds" oversimplify the moral situation in an effort to escape relativity, and tend to try to resolve situations of social injustice through the application of unrealistic political absolutes.[1]

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[1] See *ibid.*, pp. 69-70. See *infra* sec. iii, "The Christian ethical ideal and its interpretation," for a fuller discussion of Niebuhr's treatment of natural law.

[2] *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), p. 21.

In the face of such ambiguity and relativity, many people suffer a total loss of ideals and are tempted to moral cynicism and relativism. But as we have seen, Niebuhr is also highly critical of these resorts as being abdications of responsibility in the face of pressing need. "The attitude of cynicism, prompted by a disappointed idealism, is morally intolerable."[2] The moral cynic is one among those

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1. Cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, Christianity and Power Politics (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), p. 75.

2. Ibid., p. 82. Niebuhr's 1926 criticism of cynical attitudes in America is both biting and incisive:
   "I really wonder how we are going to build a civilization sufficiently intelligent to overcome dangerous prejudices and to emancipate itself from the inadequacies of conventional morality without creating the kind of sophistication which destroys all values by its scepticism and dampens every enthusiasm by its cynicism. In America that possibility is particularly dangerous because our intellectualism is of the sophomoric type. There is no generation, or only one generation, between the pioneers who conquered the prairies and these youngsters who are trying to absorb the whole of modern culture in four years. The traditions against which they react are less adequate, less modified by experience and culture, than those which inform the peoples of Europe.
   "And the teachers who guide them into the world of new knowledge are frequently themselves so recently emancipated that they try to obscure their cultural, religious and moral heritages by extreme iconoclasm.

which he terms as "the children of darkness," those "who know no law beyond their will and interest." They are evil, but in their generation they are wise, for they recognize the relativity and sinfulness in even the most well-intentioned social creed. Niebuhr holds that such insight can be robbed of its cynical characteristics by balancing it with the goodwill of the "children of light," who "believe that self interest should be brought under the discipline of a higher law. . and in harmony with a more universal good."[1]

Niebuhr finds in the political method of democracy, rightly interpreted, the means by which both moral cynicism and moral naïveté can be overcome. The better part of social realism on the modern scene is the recognition that democracy is valid and necessary, for it alone can properly maintain the balance of power in society, and thus maintain the reciprocalities of individual freedom and social order. Democracy is the only real alternative to injustice and oppression. To preserve this democracy in civilization requires both the

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It is difficult to be patient with one of these smart aleck Ph.D.s on a western campus who imagines that he can impress the world with his learning by being scornful of everything that was thought or done before this century."
See Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic (Chicago: Willett, Clark, and Colby, 1929), pp. 105-106. Republished in (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, Meridian Books, 5th printing 1964), see pp. 126-127.

1. See The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness (1944), pp. 9-11.

wisdom of the serpent and the harmlessness of the dove,[1] the realism of "the children of darkness" tempered by universal love and human respect. The community must continually re-examine its presuppositions, acknowledging the ambiguity of political and economic morality, being ready and able to adapt to changing conditions. Good government must also be buttressed with inner moral checks; human self-interest must not be destroyed but _used_,[2] for moral ambiguities are permanent in history.

Niebuhr finds in our modern situation an adequate stimulus toward ethical universalism, toward finding ways to resolve our social problems.

> The old force of universality which challenges nationalistic particularism is the sense of universal moral obligation, transcending the geographic and other limits of historic communities. The new force of universality is the global interdependence of nations, achieved by a technical civilization.[3]

> Meanwhile we live in a new dimension of history, created by the "cold war" on the one hand and the absolute impossibility of resorting to nuclear war on the other.[4]

So it becomes absolutely necessary that our world develop "an adequate political morality," one which will recognize that social conflict cannot simply be escaped, but one which

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1. Cf. Matt. 10:17 and _ibid._, p. 176.

2. See _The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness_ (1944), p. 186.

3. _Ibid._, p. 154.

4. _Ibid._, p. x.

can nevertheless act to minimize the use of coercion and regulate it so that it will be used wisely and for the achievement of good ends.[1]

Niebuhr distinguishes between said "political morality" and "religious morality," seeing that religious morality is that which is given to the pursuit of absolute ideals based on good personal motivation, while political morality is antithetical in that it deals with collective man and calculates the pragmatic results as criteria of the goodness of action.[2] The ethical ideals of these two types of morality are, respectively, love and justice. These ideals are dialectically related. "The law of love is involved in all approximations of justice, not only as the source of the norms of justice, but as an ultimate perspective by which their limitations are discovered."[3] "Anything less than loving self-sacrifice is not really justice. Justice without love is merely the balance of power. But this ideal, too logical and inevitable to be disavowed, is achieved only rarely in individual life and is not achieved in group life at all."[4]

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[1] See Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932), pp. 233-234.

[2] See ibid., p. 259.

[3] An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935), p. 128.

[4] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Moralists and Politics," The Christian Century, (July 6, 1932); cited in Essays in Applied Christianity, p. 83.

So it becomes necessary to be able to attempt to combine religiously inspired idealism with politically necessary realism.

> A high morality demands a trust in human nature and a realistic political strategy presupposes a measure of cynicism. To maintain confidence in human nature and yet deal realistically with human evil is a task which requires a rather impossible combination of realism and idealism. If it is not achieved, sentimentalists and cynics will continue to guide our generation to disaster.[1]

iii Relativity and Religious Faith

The frame of meaning

As previously noted, Niebuhr holds that any scheme of thought, including ethics, is unavoidably built upon and understood through a "frame of meaning" which itself is not the product of that scheme. Every thinker, in other words, has an implicit or explicit point of vantage, a way of looking at the world. Niebuhr believes that all such frames of reference or frames of meaning are derived in some way by means of faith. By this means he strives to legitimize intellectually what he considers to be the "Christian world view," showing that, even though modern culture has tended to reject Christian presuppositions because they are "unscientific" or outmoded, the Christian viewpoint still is a relevant and exceedingly helpful way of understanding reality

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1. *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

and of making human relationships tolerable.

Christian faith is a transcendent perspective from which meaning is derived within historical relativities. From the standpoint of Christian faith, Niebuhr contends, one can detect the relativity in which all human enterprises and interpretations are involved, one can transcend the limitations of reason through the categories of faith and hope, and one can observe the solution (in principle) of the problem of the relative and the absolute in history.

Even though Christian presuppositions have been disavowed by modern culture because of the belief that they have been corrupted by obscurantism and too-closely related to the cultural presuppositions of now-defunct civilizations, they still are valid and contain profundities which are "indispensable resources for the historic tasks which lie before us."[1] The rejection of these Christian presuppositions was a mistake, thinks Niebuhr, for involved in this rejection was an erroneous notion that the historical process itself is redemptive. Men led themselves into the erroneous conclusion that anything in the name of "progress" must be beneficial for all of mankind. According to Niebuhr, nothing could be farther from the truth. For this belief gives free reign to all sorts of real and imagined "idolatries," including

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1. The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness (1944), p. 188.

nationalism, religious fanaticism, and various other ideologies which are absolute-isms.

The Christian faith is absolute in that it provides a criterion of meaning by which all of these "isms" are seen to be defective and partial. For Christian faith insists that "the love of Christ is the final norm of human existence," and that therefore any purely human criterion can never demand our absolute allegiance. The love of Christ as the final norm of human existence means that socially we must be unwilling "to stop short of the whole community in expressing our sense of moral responsibility for the life and welfare of others."[1] There thus exists a universal law which transcends all human law, and which contains within it the demand that all men be morally obligated beyond their own partial and parochial interests.[2] Christian faith, when possessed or participated in by an individual, does not of course draw one up beyond his natural milieu to a transcendent vantage point. But it does enable one to glimpse his own relative position, as well as to see the relativities of all other purely human positions.

> The Christian faith. . . . proves its absoluteness precisely where its insights make it possible to detect the relativity of . . . interpretations [of

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[1] Ibid., pp. 188-189.

[2] Cf. ibid., p. 82.

> it] and to question the validity of any claim, including our own, that we have been redeemed. At those points it is proved that faith has discerned and is in contact with the "true" God and not with some idol of our imagination.[1]

So that which is relative (man) can discern that which is absolute (God and his way) precisely at the point of seeing that he himself _is_ relative. In other words, the fact that we are able to detect our _own_ relativity, in a real sense (by analogy or reflection) demonstrates the operation of the absolute in history, for without knowledge of God it would not be possible for us to discern that we are limited and relative.

There is also an element of the absolute in Christian faith whenever it fulfills human self-consciousness and vitality in the face of a seemingly hostile and meaningless universe. Self-consciousness and vitality are especially the qualities of religious man, and are seen in the confidence which "is assumed in every healthy life."[2] The faith of the Reformation, that "we are 'justified by faith' and 'saved in hope'" means that we look forward to a completion of life which we do not control and cannot fully comprehend. All answers of faith, in this sense, must transcend the categories of reason. This is of course an enigma and an offense to an age given to the presuppositions that man is a rational animal and can save himself ultimately through improving his capacities of reason. Yet, as Niebuhr sees the situation, man's reason cannot supply the kind and depth of answers which he needs in order to extract fullest meaning from his situation.

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[1] Kegley and Bretall (1956), p. 443.

[2] _Christianity and Power Politics_ (1940), p. 177.

> Without these answers human life is threatened with scepticism and nihilism on the one hand; and with fanaticism and pride on the other. For either it is overwhelmed by the relativity and partiality of all human perspectives and comes to the conclusion that there is no truth, since no man can expound the truth without corrupting it; or it pretends to have absolute truth despite the finite nature of human perspectives.[1]

"Biblical faith" thus is a transcendent insight which clarifies historical meaning. A "special historical drama," the Christ-event, has been given. This event clarifies "the divine mystery of creation and of . . . judgment" which the individual senses in the height of his self-consciousness.[2] Christ unifies God's mercy, love, power, and justice. The ultimate mystery is related to the mystery of the human drama. "The original mythological profundity of the Christian religion . . . sought to express the idea that the conflict between spirit and nature is a real conflict, that no complete victory of spirit in history is possible, but that defeat is turned into victory when the unachieved perfection is discovered to be a forgiving love which justifies (understands) man's imperfection."[1] Biblical faith provides a frame of meaning and helps in understanding both the individual and collective dramas of history. The "canons of pure rationality" are outraged by all of this, but nevertheless, says Niebuhr, only in this faith-way does life yield true meaning and sense.[2] The goodness and mystery of creation are bound up together. The theological conclusion that God created the world "ex nihilo" is rationally absurd, but yet it expresses the truth that "we can give no rational account of how the world of particulars is related to the 'unconditioned.'"[3]

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[1] Human Destiny (1943), p. 149

[2] The Self and the Dramas of History (1955), p. 224.

Christian faith can degenerate into obscurantism if it fails to use the precise logical and mathematical instruments of reason when dealing with those aspects of reality which are measurable and for which meaning is identical with rational coherence. But "it must also recognize that the realm of meaning, which borders on the one side on the realm of rational intelligibility, borders on the other side on mystery."[1] Meaning is not to be identified with rational intelligibility alone.

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[1] Reflections on the End of an Era (1934), p. 290.

[2] The Godly and the Ungodly (1959), p. 4. This essay, "Pious and Secular America," was first published as "Piety and Secularism in America," The Atlantic Monthly (November, 1957), pp. 180-184.

[3] Ibid., p. 126. The span of years included in the various works cited in this paragraph indicates that there is a basic continuity throughout in Niebuhr's conception of the Christian frame of meaning and its value.

The Christian faith solves the problem of the relative and the absolute in history "in principle." The problem is solved in that Christianity is a religion in which all "historical claims and pretensions" are broken, rather than underwritten. The "enemies" of Christianity have not recognized this central characteristic of the faith, according to Niebuhr, and therefore have long wished for its destruction, thinking that religion is the tool, rather than the critic of historical "pretensions." Actually, no religion could create any such problem, for the problem is fundamental to human selfhood and human history--a problem which the relation of the relative and the absolute clarifies. Christian faith claims that the absolute has broken through into history, challenging all relative and pretentious historical norms in the process. The Christian faith may merely aggravate the problem if it claims too much, but Niebuhr sees that alternative solutions to the problem of the relative and the absolute tend either toward the "abyss of scepticism" or else toward new fanaticisms.[2]

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[1] Ibid., p. 142.

[2] Cf. Human Destiny (1943), p. 220.

God has a purpose which he reveals through the relative flux of historical events. Belief in a personal God whose will is being fulfilled or thwarted in society is justified by actual experience, giving meaning to our whole cultural history.[1]

> The Christian faith makes sense in affirming that an historic person and event, in the context of the history of Messianic expectations, were a revelation of the divine mercy and justice, and that the crucifixion was the final revelation and symbol of the universality of human sin and the incapacity of men to solve the moral problem of human existence by the strenuousness of their moral striving. If men recognize the fragmentariness of all human virtue, Christ becomes to them the symbol of an ultimate mercy which overcomes the hiatus between human and divine righteousness.[2]

The rationally-absurd doctrine that both meaning and salvation are introduced into the relative historical contexts through a suffering Messiah is central to Christian faith, according to Niebuhr.

> The idea of a suffering and therefore merciful God is a clue to the meaning of existence. It clears up two problems about man's self-regard. It does not regard this phenomenon as normative even though it be universal. That is to say, it insists on taking sin seriously and repudiates all theories which regard egotism as harmless because it is natural; or which regard it as harmful but do not see that the universal characteristic of human behavior is not a normative expression of the human self. The other problem which is clarified is the problem of what to do about this persistent and universal human egotism. That is answered on the ultimate level by divine forgiveness. It must be

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[1] Cf. The Self and the Dramas of History (1955), pp. 65-67.

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 136-137.

> answered on all proximate levels of statecraft by providing all kinds of guards against the dangers of both collective and individual egotism.[1]

So history is clarified and understood by being transcended, and it is brought to an end in a larger and more complete meaning.

> The hope of the resurrection . . . embodies the very genius of the Christian idea of the historical. On the one hand it implies that eternity will fulfill and not annul the richness and variety which the temporal process has elaborated. On the other it implies that the condition of finiteness and freedom, which lies at the basis of historical existence, is a problem for which there is no solution by any human power. Only God can solve this problem. From the human perspective it can only be solved by faith. All structures of meaning and realms of coherence, which human reason constructs, face the chasm of meaninglessness when men discover that the tangents of meaning transcend the limits of existence. Only faith has an answer for this problem. The Christian answer is faith in the God who is revealed in Christ and from whose love neither life nor death can separate us.[2]

And out of historical relativity comes hope.

> Christian faith is . . . a type of optimism which places its ultimate confidence in the love of God and not the love of man, in the ultimate and transcendent unity of reality and not in tentative and superficial harmonies of existence which human ingenuity may contrive. It insists, quite logically, that this ultimate hope becomes possible only to those who no longer place their confidence in purely human possibilities. Repentance is thus the gateway into the Kingdom of God.[3]

In addition to the absoluteness and finality which faith

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1. Ibid., pp. 136-137.

2. Human Destiny (1943), p. 295.

3. An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935), p. 112.

gives, Christianity is uniquely valuable and applicable to historical situations. The word appropriate here is relevance. Niebuhr insists that the Christian faith is relevant to all social situations. By this he means, apparently, that the faith is not merely an abstraction which is divorced from human needs in the social struggle. He means that faith supplies an insight and a source of power out of which decisions can be made, and rightly. Distinctions between right and wrong can be drawn, relative good can be distinguished from relative evil. To be relevant, in this context, at least, is to be useful, pragmatically productive of right decisions and desired results. The Christian faith, according to Niebuhr, is relevant in this sense. In the welter of ethical decisions which must be made, faith is useful in providing meaning and preserving moral vitality, as an ethical *via media* between illusion and despair.

Moral vitality depends upon a measure of individual transcendence over the community, according to Niebuhr. For only individuals can truly be moral; this is impossible for communities. Communities tend to attenuate the individual's incentive toward a sacrificial morality, since communities can never afford to be self-sacrificing. Also, moral vitality is benefited in a climate in which the individual is viewed as having transcendent worth. Niebuhr is convinced that ~~it is~~ "only in a religious culture which knows a universe of meaning in which this individual freedom has support and significance" that a measure of individual transcendence will be achieved.[1] Man's sense of moral obligation must not arbitrarily be limited by his community if moral vitality is to be preserved. "The religious transcendence of the individual over the community is a final resource for the highest forms of social realization."[2]

This religious transcendence is dependent upon religious faith, for "implicit in the human situation of freedom and in man's capacity to transcend himself and his world is his inability to construct a world of meaning without finding a source and key to the structure of meaning which transcends the world beyond his own capacity to transcend it."[3] Moral vitality depends on man's seeing a meaning for his existence.

Also of tremendous importance to the relevance of Christian faith in providing meaning and moral vitality for human existence is the Christian doctrine of the atonement. In Niebuhr's interpretation, this doctrine paradoxically relates God's wrath and his mercy. There is a twofold emphasis here: that man is obligated to fulfill the possibilities of life but also that all historic realizations of this obligation are corrupt and relative. Therefore history necessarily points beyond itself to an ultimate fulfillment and realization. History cannot fulfill its own promises. "The wrath and the judgment of God are symbolic of the seriousness of history." And God's mercy points toward a transcendent fulfillment. There is also an overall practical importance in this doctrine, for in it "the distinctions between good and evil are important and have ultimate significance."[1]

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[1] The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness (1944), p. 79.

[2] Ibid., p. 81.

[3] Human Nature (1941), p. 164.

In 1956 Niebuhr testified: "The situation is that I have come gradually to realize that it is possible to look at the human situation without illusion and without despair only from the standpoint of the Christ-revelation."[2] Pessimism and despair are challenged by "profound religion," which seeks and finds a center of life's meaning which includes the total existence of man. This central meaning "is able to interpret . . . chaos as something which only provisionally threatens its cosmos and can ultimately be brought under its dominion."[3] Religious man has faith that there exists a transcendent moral perfection which both inspires and convicts his own approximation of itself. Also, religious man is able to understand and accept without a sense of outraged

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1. Human Destiny (1943), p. 211.
2. Kegley and Bretall (1956), p. 439.
3. Christianity and Power Politics (1940), p. 179.

innocence any ill fortunes and evils which he may suffer. The chaos of evil is made a part of the cosmos of moral meaning, and man's ethical sanity is preserved.[1] To the religious man, "chaos and death . . . are the revelations of the consequences of human sin; and if they cannot be completely comprehended in those terms they may still be regarded as a part of the meaning of life which has not been fully disclosed to man."[2] Religious faith thus has the practical value of conferring meaning upon history, even though it negates the secularist theme that within history all meaning is to be found. Religious faith shows that history is not and never can be perfect, but must be fulfilled beyond itself. Historical illusions are shown to be inadequate at the same time that despair over this fact is overcome in a transcendent hope. And the social relevance of this paradoxical truth can be more explicitly stated by showing that both fanaticism and cynicism can be attenuated by the application of religious faith.[3]

> True self-knowledge delivers the self from cynicism in regard to the neighbor because it discerns the similarity between the corruption in the heart of the neighbor and the heart of the self. It is from such "pessimism" that gratitude and charity flow,

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1. Cf. ibid., pp. 197-198.

2. Ibid., p. 198.

3. Cf. The Godly and the Ungodly (1959), pp. 136-137.

> provided that there is an assurance of final forgiveness for the ineradicable evil in the human heart. That assurance can lift the self from depair to "newness of life."[1]

In his pragmatic concern, Niebuhr always insists that religious faith must be validated in practice.[2] Faith is always connected to the "moral predicament" of man, and is meaningless itself unless the predicament be known and kept in the forefront of consideration. Faith's answer to the moral predicament is to declare that "God is love," "and that his love is the final source of harmony for men who know they ought to love one another but who really love themselves." Faith reveals that the predicament of self contradiction is a universal predicament, and with this knowledge should come individual confession of one's involvement in this predicament of sin, from which we are delivered through the forgiveness of God.[3]

The Christian ethical ideal and its interpretation

The ethical ideal of Christianity is *agape*, the love of God. Love operates primarily in the form of an absolute obligation, though it functions in practice as an impetus to the formation of high moral goals within history, issuing in a plethora of rewards and happinesses, and in this sense it acts indirectly as a "highest good." Man must strive to fulfill its demands, and can achieve various levels of justice in so doing.

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[1] *Ibid.*, pp. 144-145.

[2] Cf. *ibid.*, p. 145.

[3] See *ibid.*, p. 143.

Following recent discussions upon this theme, Niebuhr has made many attempts to define and describe agape. Essentially he describes it as "heedless of the self."[1] This means that agape is extended freely and with no calculated concern for self-detriment or self-betterment. The interests of the self are not considered in agape. Niebuhr also defines agape as "complete disinterestedness,"[2] though this is not to be understood as a lack of interest in the good of others nor as a general dispassionate nature that agape necessitates. The "disinterest"is applied to the interests of the self, which are to be left out of consideration or even negated if the agape occasion demands. Agape always requires that there be concern, although the concern is outward in direction, rather than inward.

In human relationships, agape is typified by a boundless self-giving. In the ethic of the New Testament agape includes but is not included in mutual love. It is not reciprocated

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1. Kegley and Bretall (1956), p. 442.
2. Love and Justice (article 1932), p. 31.

or historically justified.[1] Whereas mutual love tends to be withdrawn if it is not returned by the love object, agape does not depend at all upon reciprocation for its continuance and verve. Likewise, agape can never be equated with mutual love, because then it would tend to degenerate into "a prudential ethic, according to which we are counseled to forgive our foe because he will then cease to be our foe; and are promised that if suffering love becomes sufficiently general, it will cease to be 'suffering' and change society into a harmony of life in which no one need suffer."[2] For Niebuhr, agape always remains a "suffering love," one which calculates nothing in advance, expects nothing in return, and is willing that its own interests be sacrificed for the good of others. In situations of strife and political discord, agape gives evidence of itself in a refusal to exercise power.[3]

From the standpoint of God, agape is involvement in the relativities of human history. And from the human standpoint, agape is man's transcendence of history.[1] In man, agape calls for perfection. Niebuhr interprets the perfection of love to mean "all-inclusiveness," since the love of God includes all. If Jesus' "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect"[2] be interpreted as "let your love therefore be all-inclusive as God's love includes all,"[3] thinks Niebuhr, this would make the demand a part of the consistent love-universalism of Jesus. Then it would be "more relevant to the problem of communal justice"[4] than is the

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[1] See Kegley and Bretall (1956), p. 442.

[2] Ibid.

[3] This in spite of the fact that the source of agape is in the divine, in whom is seen the "perfect coincidence of power and goodness," Human Destiny (1943), p. 72. This also in spite of Niebuhr's social doctrine which includes advocacy of the use of power in applying the ethical ideal in proximate social situations. The ethical ideal is being discussed here.

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1. Cf. ibid., pp. 71-72.
2. Matt. 5:48.
3. The Godly and the Ungodly (1959), p. 103. From "The Relations of Christians and Jews in Western Civilization," unpublished paper read before a joint meeting of the faculties of the Jewish Theological Seminary and Union Theological Seminary.
4. Ibid. Niebuhr draws upon Charles Cutler Torrey's The Four Gospels for this interpretation, in the main. On p. 117 he says:
"The prophet Amos initiated the criticism of cultic holiness and demanded justice in the name of the 'Holy One of Israel.' He demanded, in short, attainable though rigorous historical goals in the name of the mysterious God. This demand for rigorous justice, which always includes an existential sympathy for the poor, the widows and orphans and the oppressed and always prompts criticism of the powerful, the 'Elders of Israel,' the rulers and judges, lays the foundation for an historical ethic which remains more relevant to all our historic tasks and responsibilities than the demand for selfless perfection. For the emphasis is always on the self's relation to the holy community rather than the self's absolute purity."
This is germane in that Niebuhr here is discussing only

older interpretation of "perfection" in terms of inner moral motivation. This also fits the notion that agape is disinterested and impartial, that it does not consider the loveliness or the worthiness of the object loved when conferring love. Agape is overflowing; it spills out of the self without discrimination as to whom the love is extended. It is loving action, as Niebuhr elsewhere observes, "a vital emulation of the divine love in which all the emotions and volitions of life are included."[1] This does not mean, either, that agape is wholly non-rational, for it is "both a rational and religious ideal. Its form is possible only where reason comprehends life beyond itself in the most inclusive terms; but the obligation to realize the ideal represents a sublimation of the will and the emotions which is religious rather than rational in character."[2]

In history, the highest fulfillment of agape is found in forgiveness. Niebuhr points out that forgiveness in history is possible only for the contrite sinner who realizes his own involvement in sin and thus is able to forgive from a position of empathy born of experience. "Every form of

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the ethical ideal, which itself is impossible of fulfillment in history, for "letting one's love be all-inclusive" is certainly a human impossibility!

1. Human Destiny (1943), pp. 91-92.

2. Reflections on the End of an Era (1934), pp. 265-266.

Christian righteousness that rests upon a too simple doctrine of redemption must degenerate into a self-righteousness in which the 'man in Christ' looks with scorn and judgment upon the man who is presumably not in Christ."[1] Self-righteous moral idealists are unable to forgive others. Forgiveness is forthcoming "only when they feel themselves to be standing under God with them, and feel that under the divine scrutiny all 'our righteousness is as filthy rags.'"[2] "Only religious realists can have respect, pity, and forgiveness for the foe whom they do not understand."[3] Love is motivated by the gratitude and contrition which are born of a religious realism that knows both the heights and depths of human possibilities and knows the forgiveness which has been extended from God. So again, **true** self-awareness bears fruit in that knowing oneself is to know evil, so that a vindictive spirit can be forsworn, enabling the self to love freely and to forgive readily.[4]

Man's ability to express agape is not a matter of works, but of grace. Niebuhr has termed agape as an "impossible possibility" in his An Interpretation of Christian Ethics. He has since repudiated or amended some of the thoughts in this work,[1] but perhaps of more real validity in this case is his 1956 preface to the book's reprinting, in which he states that his present position is essentially the same, except that he would wish to elaborate upon it and correct some "imperfections" in it.[2] At any rate, Niebuhr's later writings serve to reiterate the theme of the earlier book, insofar as he continues to conceive of _agape_ as both possible (and therefore relevant) and impossible (pure love is not the law of all areas of life). It is impossible from the standpoint of man alone. But with God, and in light of his grace toward man, it is a possibility. The moral dynamic, at least, is a possibility supplied by grace, even though the content of morals may have to be derived rationally and empirically.

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[1] Reinhold Niebuhr, "An Open Letter to Richard Roberts," Christianity and Society (Summer, 1940), pp. 30-33. Republished in Love and Justice, p. 269.

[2] Reinhold Niebuhr, "When Will Christians Stop Fooling Themselves?", The Christian Century (May 16, 1934). Republished in Love and Justice, p. 44.

[3] Ibid., p. 46.

[4] Cf. An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935), p. 201.

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[1] Cf. Kegley and Bretall (1956), pp. 434-435: "I am not . . . able to defend, or interested in defending, any position I took in An Interpretation of Christian Ethics." The way in which Niebuhr has amended his thinking on this particular point can perhaps be illustrated by a quotation from the same piece (see p. 442): "The relation between sacrificial love and mutual love contains the issue of the relation between the eschatological and the historical in a nutshell. Love, heedless of the self, must be the initiator of any reciprocal love. Otherwise the calculation of mutual advantages makes love impossible. But heedless love usually wins a response of love. That is a symbol of the moral content of history. But this response cannot be guaranteed, as modern thought sought erroneously to guarantee it. That is symbolic of the 'tragic' dimension of history and a proof that the meaning of life always transcends the fulfillments of meaning in history. That is why Christian faith is 'eschatological' and has a touch of 'otherworldliness,' which one cannot eliminate by trying to contain all facets of meaning in the processes of history."

[2] According to his own testimony, the major difference in his concept of love between the years 1935 and 1956 lies in his disenchantment with what he later perceived as an overly naïve, idealistic view of love as totally a possibility for man in all situations. He came to dissociate himself from that element of liberalism which holds to this, especially the "Social Gospel" movement, and to identify rather with what he felt to be more perceptive and realistic types of "social Christianity." See the preface to An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, pp. 8-11.

Niebuhr is famous for his "by-product" theory[1] that the self is fulfilled through _agape_, that self-giving uncalculated is the surest way to self-realization, but that if self-realization is consciously pursued by whatever means it will lead to grief. "Whatever spiritual wealth the self has within itself is the by-product of its relations, affections and responsibilities, of its concern for life beyond itself."[2] The self-realization which is a result of the practice of _agape_ is spiritual rather than physical, and may be realized in a transcendent realm rather than within history. "According to the ethic of Jesus the actual motive of _agape_ is always conformity to the will of God: 'that ye may be children of your Father in heaven.' Thus the harmonies which are actually achieved in history always are partly borrowed from the Eternal."[1]

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[1] See June Bingham, _The Courage to Change: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr_ (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), pp. 37-38.

[2] _Faith and History_ (1949), p. 177.

Niebuhr regards the distinction which Anders Nygren makes between _agape_ and _eros_, the calculated, self-seeking love of Greek classicism, as too absolute. Nygren tends to dissociate all self-gain from the act of self-giving love, whereas the New Testament, in the view of Niebuhr, unites the two types of love paradoxically.

> Nygren fails . . . to take the paradox of self-realization through self-giving, as we have it in the New Testament, seriously. Consequently his _Agape_ is really a complete impossibility and irrelevance for man. It describes the character of God but has no real relation, as source and end, toward _Philia_ and _Eros_, toward either mutual love or expressions of love, tainted with self-interest, which are the actual stuff of our human existence.[2]

Niebuhr is dissatisfied with Nygren, then, because he separates _Agape_ too radically from human nature. But, dialectically, he also rejects the opposite emphasis which would "find a too simple basis in human nature for the grace of _Agape_," as found in Father M. C. D'Arcy's _The Mind and Heart of Love_. Niebuhr finds significance in this for the general discrepancies between Protestant and Catholic theological positions relative to the consideration of human nature.[1] His conclusion is that *agape* is both possible and impossible, and for this reason it is relevant.

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[1] _Human Destiny_ (1943), p. 84. Niebuhr refers to Matt. 5:45.

[2] _Faith and History_ (1949), p. 178. Niebuhr also cites Matt. 7:11 to substantiate his analysis: "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him." Cf. _Human Destiny_ (1943), p. 84n.

> The perpetual relevance of the norm of *Agape* to the structure of human existence lies in the fact that it is both the fulfillment of the self's freedom and the contradiction of every actual self-realization insofar as every actual self-realization is partly an egoistic and therefore a premature closing of the self within itself. *Agape* is thus, as the final norm of the self as free spirit, a perpetual source of judgment upon every other norm which may be used tentatively to describe the self's duties and obligations. At the same time it refutes the lawlessness of those theories which imagine that the freedom of the self entitles it to have no law but its own will. Such a proud assertion of the self's freedom and disavowal of its finiteness leads to self-destruction.[2]

Neither mystical contemplation nor rationalistic abstract theory are satisfactory to describe or express the Christian ethical ideal. Both of these attempts tend to interpret Christian love as being love toward God alone, and overlook the necessary relations between human beings in history which are so central to the concept and practice of *agape*. The mystic zeal excludes love of the neighbor in its complete absorption with the possibilities of uniting with God. This attitude cuts off half of the biblical dialectic, which insists that the God of Christian revelation is engaged in the world, and that man's highest perfection consists not in the achievement of a unity of being excluding man's natural and historical "vitalities," but including them. "The highest unity is a harmony of love in which the self relates itself in its freedom to other selves in their freedom under the will of God."[1] So mysticism, even of the highest and purest Christian type, fulfills only half of the Christian love commandment, that is, the command to love God; the second command is to love one's neighbor, the horizontal direction of agape.[2,3] Rationally-conceived theories of love are always inadequate because they tend to be only theories, that is, they tend to leave out the human factors of emotion and other historical vitalities which are not purely of the capacity of reason. It is possible to build beautiful schemes of social justice which command the respect of reason but which if followed absolutely would wreak great injustices because the "human factor" is left out. Niebuhr insists that love be interpreted as concrete and situational; any theory must be relevant, else it run the risk of pure abstraction which does not help in personal relationships. The "rational love of God" may truly be "disinterested." But this type of disinterest is the rational and "objective" disinterest of the purely theoretical thinker; it has no comprehension of the passionate involvement which the Christian ethical ideal demands of its practitioners.

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[1] *Faith and History*, p. 178 n.

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 178-179.

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[1] Human Destiny (1943), p. 95.

[2] See Luke 12:33.

[3] Cf. Human Destiny (1943), pp. 90-95. On p. 90 he says: "if the Christian doctrine of Christ as the 'second Adam' refutes both the romantics, who think a return to primeval innocency possible, and the evolutionary optimists who think that history moves towards a perfection in which nature-history is transcended without ceasing to be grounded in nature, it also refutes the mystics who seek perfection by contemplation of, and final incorporation into, an eternity from which all vitalities and particularities of history have been subtracted."

There are insights in the Protestant Reformation of real significance for the history of Christian thought and life, in Niebuhr's opinion. But he also finds inadequacies in the thought of Luther and Calvin, in particular, which he feels limit their relevance for contemporary ethics. Of importance to a correct understanding of the human exercise of agape is the Reformation insistence that it is the result, not the cause, of man's justification before God. Thus agape is separated from any prudential or soteriological ethic by which man can work his way into the favor of God. Luther's insight concerning agape was that it contains possibilities of love towards all, and that this love is "disinterested" as to motive. But Niebuhr, social activist that he is, finds unattractive in Luther certain tendencies toward an ethical "quietism" which fears to act because it may tempt man to pride in his own works. He is convinced that the recognition that one sins even within his highest ethical action is not sufficient grounds for disavowing said ethical action.[1] For Niebuhr, it is not necessary to be free absolutely from the taint of sin in one's actions or ideology in order to act with authority for the improvement of society. There are implications here for social change, for the justification of waging war, and also for sanctioning society's mandate to preserve justice and whatever is right.[2] This is a most important realization for the whole of his "social ethics," since he believes that no one is ever free from the taint of sin.

Niebuhr also finds a weakness in the Reformation doctrine which unduly emphasizes "a highly personal and interior sanctification." Sanctification becomes an objectionable doctrine at the point of making ethical action to be solely the result of freely-given justification accomplished through faith but no longer responsible in the social relationships included in situations of obedience to law. His criticism of this emphasis is that "it is indifferent to relative moral discriminations, . . . and does not deal seriously with all the possible extensions of justice to which men ought to be driven by an uneasy conscience."[1] Therefore, in "its indifference towards the relative distinctions of truth and falsehood which are so important in the history of culture," the Reformation was "delivered into the sin of cultural obscurantism."[2] Niebuhr finds this to be true of Lutheran concepts of personal ethics and especially so of Lutheranism's social ethics. He holds that Christians can at no juncture in their experience afford to be complacent or to rest content in justification with an easy conscience regarding social injustice. This is tantamount to irrelevance, the greatest sin in the opinion of a social activist and revolutionary. So Niebuhr accuses Luther, and Lutheranism,[3] of "transposing an 'inner' ethic into a private one, and making the 'outer' or 'earthly' ethic authoritative for government," thus achieving "a curiously perverse social morality," by placing "a perfectionist private ethic in juxtaposition to a realistic, not to say cynical, official ethic."[4]

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[1] Cf. ibid., pp. 187-188.

[2] Cf. The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness (1944), p. 188. Cf. also the discussion in Human Nature (1941), pp. 255-264.

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[1] Human Destiny (1943), p. 190.

[2] Ibid., p. 191.

[3] His accusations come despite his own Lutheran conditioning, let us note. His college and seminary training and ministry were all within the "Evangelical Church," now known as "Evangelical and Reformed," which derives from Lutheran traditions.

[4] Human Destiny (1943), see pp. 194-195.

To correct what he considers Lutheranism's inability to define consistent criteria for the achievement of relative justice, Niebuhr would emphasize a Renaissance insight concerning historical existence which insists that the social struggle is amenable to progressive melioration because "life represents an indeterminate series of possibilities, and therefore of obligation to filfill them."[1] He finds only a limited value in the Lutheran idea of an "order of creation," believing that it fails to take into consideration the fact of human freedom which "alters and transmutes the 'given' facts of creation so much that no human institutions can be judged purely by the criterion of fixed principles of 'creation.'"[2] And Luther's doctrine of the two realms likewise comes in for criticism because it established practically "an ethical dualism between public and private, between inner and social, morality." This too contributes to what Niebuhr considers to be the inability of Lutheranism to come to grips with the fine points of discriminate justice in history, "the nicely calculated less and more" of relative justice, for it makes order, rather than justice, to be the norm of history and thus robs historical ethics of its ability to effect social change for the better.

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1. Ibid., p. 190.

2. Ibid., p. 197.

In the ethical thought of Calvin, Niebuhr finds an overemphasis on obedience to law and a self-righteousness born of the Christian's preoccupation with his own sanctification. He sees Calvin as given to "legalism," making Christian virtue to be the honoring of God's majesty primarily through obedience rather than love. And Calvin also gives comfort to a pitiless and loveless self-righteousness, thinks Niebuhr, in making the most heinous sin to be "dishonouring the majesty of God" rather than doing violence to the personage of a fellow human being.[1] He finds that Calvin's concept of "divine law" is guilty of both "obscurantism" and "pretension."

> It is obscurantist in that it does not sufficiently engage man's rational capacities in determining what is just and unjust in his relation to his fellows. It appeals prematurely to Biblical authority for answers to every conceivable moral and social problem. . . . Calvin's ethical system is pretentious as well as obscurantist; for it gives the Christian an unjustified confidence in the transcendent perfection of the moral standards which he has derived from Scripture and obscures not only the endless relativities of judgment, involved in applying a Scriptural standard to a particular situation, but also the historical relativities which are imbedded in these Scriptural standards themselves.[2]

Niebuhr thinks that Roman Catholic ethical thought is guilty of a "premature transcendence over history," in that it arrogates to itself the power and ability to determine absolutely what constitutes Christian ethical behavior in all situations.[1] Therefore Catholic ethics continually has a problem in making relative moral judgments. Niebuhr thinks that Catholicism has incorporated the "whole Stoic concept of the natural law, including its distinction between a relative and an absolute natural law" into its own ethical system. This is a rationally-derived system.

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[1] See *ibid.*, pp. 200-203.

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 202-203.

> The difficulty with this impressive structure of Catholic ethics, finally elaborated into a detailed casuistic application of general moral standards to every conceivable particular situation, is that it constantly insinuates religious absolutes into highly contingent and historical moral judgments. Thus the whole imposing structure of Thomistic ethics is, in one of its aspects, no more than a religious sanctification of the relativities of the feudal social system as it flowered in the thirteenth century. The confusion between ultimate religious perspectives and relative historical ones in Catholic thought accounts for the fury and self-righteousness into which Catholicism is betrayed when it defends feudal types of civilization.[2]

Niebuhr believes that the ethic of Jesus, and therefore the ethical ideal of Christianity, "is the perfect fruit of prophetic religion." His concept of "prophetic religion" is that it is concerned primarily for the relative improvement of the social scene, including the necessity to make moral discriminations and derive mandates for enforcing relative moral decisions which will benefit collective mankind. "Prophetic religion" is a pragmatic faith, identifying itself with the love ideal because the love ideal is "relevant" and useful in bringing about good results in social intercourse, even though it can never fully be implemented in historical relativity.

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[1] Though he castigates the Catholic moral philosophers for this, he thinks that Protestantism commits the same error with different "pretensions." Cf. *ibid.*, p. 203.

[2] *Human Nature* (1941), pp. 220-221.

From the standpoint of historical considerations, the highest kind of love is mutual love. The highest good, historically conceived, results from a situation in which there is mutual love and respect, a reciprocity of harmonious existence. But in some "liberal" interpretations of love it is presented as a progressive, increasingly powerful force by which all evil will eventually be banished from history. Niebuhr insists that _agape_ is and will remain _suffering love_ in history, that it can never be triumphant in history. _Agape_ is self-sacrificing; it is in violation of natural moral standards which insist on reciprocity. Yet it operates as a support and a goal of mutual historical love and thus is the basis for all ethical action. _Agape_ lends support to mutualist ethics by helping to remove the fear which mutuality carries that the love which it extends _will_ not in fact be reciprocated. Mutual love, in effect, cannot even be achieved if it is dominated by the fear that it will not be loved in return.[1]

"The absolute character of the ethic of Jesus conforms to the actual constitution of man and history, that is, to the transcendent freedom of man over the contingencies of nature and the necessities of time, so that only a final harmony of life with life in love can be the ultimate norm of his existence."[2] But this final harmony is not a historical harmony; it is transcendent, in Niebuhr's view.

> The same Cross which symbolizes the love of God and reveals the divine perfection to be not incompatible with a suffering involvement in historical tragedy, also indicates that the perfection of man is not attainable in history. Sacrificial love transcends history. . . . It is an act in history; but it cannot justify itself in history.[3]

So a sacrificial love can never claim to be "successful," and success is the criterion for justification in human culture. It is a high moral ideal, but an ideal is always compromised in every realization of itself. The practical application of an ideal necessarily involves the balancing of selfish interests in history, and this mutuality is not agape. But the presence of the ideal furnishes material for ever wider dimensions of achievement in the area of brotherhood and possibilities for mutual love and toleration.[1] Agape thus both negates and fulfills history.[2] It requires an "eschatological" element, for the true meaning and fulfillment of life are not found within history, just as the self cannot fulfill itself therein.

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[1] See Human Destiny (1943), pp. 68-69.

[2] Ibid., pp. 50-51.

[3] Ibid., p. 68.

Agape functions as a relevant norm for the "structures of human existence," for it both fulfills the self's transcendent freedom, as the self transcends itself (its own "nature") and contradicts every actual self-realization, just as the self in transcending itself contradicts itself. Because it is an absolute ideal, it operates in human decisions as a source of judgment by which to see the inadequacies of every historical norm. And because it is a relevant ideal, it refutes those theories which imagine that the self in its freedom is above any earthly law or norm.[3] Thus agape exists in an "indirect and paradoxical relation to specific standards."[4] It is a paradoxical "law" which both transcends and fulfills all historical laws.

The Christian ideal is in danger of becoming irrelevant to the problems of justice whenever it is treated, as so often is the case in American Christianity, as a simple solution to every problem of society.[1] This is because "to set self-interest and the general welfare in simple opposition is to ignore nine-tenths of the ethical issues that confront the consciences of men."[2] The proper administration of justice requires more than that it be recognized that evil exists and that men should love one another. It requires that there be a discrimination between conflicting claims made upon the self by various claims of others and that the claims of the self be considered equally with the claims of others. The choices which bring about social justice are seldom simple ones; they are often tragic. So the love ideal is no simple substitute for relative virtue and relative justice.

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[1] Cf. An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935), p. 182.

[2] Cf. Faith and History (1949), p. 135 and Human Destiny (1943), p. 246.

[3] Faith and History (1949), pp. 178-179.

[4] Ibid., p. 174.

And yet the social ideal needs the judgment and fulfillment which the religious ideal supplies. For "justice . . . that is only justice is less than justice." Because of human bias and "natural" selfishness, the insights of love are required. The ethical ideal of Jesus "gives us an absolute standard by which to judge both personal and social righteousness."[1] It is useful in making comparisons between relative ethical choices, though _agape_ itself is not practical for direct application because of its transcendence over history. Niebuhr believes that _agape_ functions to "mitigate" the social struggle, as well as to transcend it. Every realization of true justice in history approximates the ethical ideal in some degree, but each new level of social achievement is always imperfect in comparison to _agape_ and stands in some way in contradiction to it.[2]

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[1] Niebuhr cut his polemical teeth in opposition to the "Social Gospel" movement in Protestant Christianity over just this ethical question.

[2] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Justice and Love," Christianity and Society (Fall, 1950). Republished in Love and Justice, p. 27.

As has been seen,[3] Niebuhr places the notion of "equality" in high esteem as a standard for judging social justice in approximation to the "law of love." "Equality, being a rational, political version of the law of love, shares with it the quality of transcendence."[4] Equality is grounded in the law of love, as a minimal standard and regulative principle of justice, pointing toward love as its highest fulfillment. Equality of interests and rights is asserted in this principle and not, of course, outright equality of all individuals in every respect. But equality is a rational principle in that "in spite of the relativity of morals every conceivable moral code and every philosophy of morals enjoins concern for the life and welfare of the other and seeks to restrain the unqualified assertion of the interests of the self against the other."[1]

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[1] _Ibid_. (article 1932), pp. 32-33.

[2] _Human Destiny_ (1943), p. 246. Cf. pp. 247-248 also.

[3] See supra, sec. ii, "Relativity in Social and Political Life."

[4] _An Interpretation of Christian Ethics_ (1935), p. 101.

So _agape_ fits the nature of man, both as being a part of the historical order, wherein the love ideal is a relevant and meaningful guide, and as being transcendent over the natural, where it points beyond history toward an ultimate fulfillment. Man is not self-sufficient, and depends for self-realization upon other selves. He can fulfill himself only "in a responsible and loving relation to his fellowmen."[2] _Agape_, divine suffering love, resolves the enigmas of life by bearing and thus overcoming the sins of the world. Christian love is self-authenticating, because it involves the recognition of the self's limitations and a resultant deprecation of the self.[3] Men, when abandoning themselves to God's power and mercy in faith and in repentance, find meaning for their existence and receive divine power to do aright.[4] In this there is self-realization, unsought but

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1. _Ibid._, p. 100.
2. _Faith and History_ (1949), p. 197.
3. Kegley and Bretall (1956), p. 443.
4. See _Faith and History_ (1949), p. 136.

fully bestowed, as a by-product of love freely given.

But agape also contradicts human achievements, even when these achievements are the result of man's high rational capacity which is itself a transcendent perspective. Agape transcends the highest of human achievements, because of the fact that even the best that man can accomplish is still tainted with sin, representing the basic drive of self-love which opposes the ideal of agape. "Pure love is 'by faith' in the sense that only when man, in prayer and contemplation, is lifted beyond himself does he have a vantage point from which self-love does not operate. In action the power of self-love is mixed with the new power of the love of God which grace has established."[1] Christian faith fulfills human self-consciousness, in its repulsion of pride, fanaticism, and skepticism.

Agape is given as a personal ethic, though it carries imperative social implications. The distinction between an individual and a social ethic[2] is not intended in any way to deprecate the social ethic, but rather to show the error which lies in attempting to apply directly an absolute to a relative situation. Niebuhr states elsewhere that "pure

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1. Human Destiny (1943), p. 137.

2. Cf. Niebuhr's preface to An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935) where he contrasts briefly a social ethic and "the absolute ethic of the gospels," (p. 9).

religious idealism does not concern itself with the social problem."[1] But this does not mean that one should show no concern for society. Consistently he has maintained just the opposite.[2] His intent here is to illustrate that the love ideal in its purity has no connection with the social milieu whose values require that one's own advantage must be calculated in advance before any love can be conferred. Agape in its rigorous and ideal form is an impossibility for historical man, and must be translated into terms of justice in order to be relevant to man's relative situation.

Some of the most important parts of Niebuhr's ethical writings have to do with his considerations of the relationship between Christian love and law. The whole problem of the relative and the absolute hinges upon this relation, since these two aspects of ethical thought describe the impulse and motivation of Christian ethics.

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[1] Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932), p. 263.

[2] See Love and Justice:
"Those of us who believe in the complete reorganization of modern society are not wrong in using the ideal of Jesus as a vantage point from which to condemn the present social order, but I think we are in error when we try to draw from the teachings of Jesus any warrant for the social policies which we find necessary to attain to any modicum of justice. We may be right in believing that we are striving for a justice which approximates the Christian ideal more closely than the present social order, but we are wrong when we talk about achieving a 'Christian social order',"(p. 33).
It has been urged elsewhere (see supra, p. 103) that Niebuhr's thoughts during his earlier period (1932), while no longer held in their entirety, still prove consistent at many points, such as this, and are not out of harmony with his later thought in this degree.

As has been observed, Niebuhr is convinced that there is an essential or "fairly universal" agreement in all moral systems concerning the immorality of certain actions, such as murder and thievery. The content of even these general principles varies, however. But the important fact, for this discussion, is not that the content varies from place to place and from time to time, proving the relativity of all human formulations of law. Niebuhr freely admits that human laws are relative. The essential factor here is that there is some universal agreement concerning the _types_ of action which are considered illegitimate. Niebuhr holds that these minimal standards of moral conduct are "grounded in the law of love," and point toward it for ultimate fulfillment.[1]

But in Niebuhr's view, it is not possible that a universal system of ethical standards can be defined through reason alone. The relativities of historical communities preclude that possibility. That is, no rational ethical system can be elaborated as absolutely applicable and valid for all people at all times. This unenviable situation Niebuhr traces to the loss of man's "original perfection" (_Justitia Originalis_), so that his "natural" capacities for justice are always tainted and partial. Man "changes the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man."[1] This inherent weakness also infects all "scientific" descriptions of the human situation or structure of man's personality, such as might be found in certain psychological estimates of human nature, or in various systems of prudential ethics.

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[1] Cf. _An Interpretation of Christian Ethics_ (1935), p. 100.

> The universal reverence for the heroic act and for the martyr's sacrifice, particularly the sacrifice of his life, attest to the universal acceptance of the validity of the transhistorical tangents of the meaning of our existence and to the realization far beyond the confines of any faith, that it is possible for man to lose his life, or his real self by trying too desperately to preserve his physical life, or in other words, that man is sufficiently self-transcendent to know that physical life can be bought at too high a price. This knowledge makes nonsense of all purely utilitarian or hedonistic or even eudaemonistic estimates of the ends of life.[2]

In other words, there exists in the very structure and operation of the created universe an "unwritten law" which man knows by virtue of his self-transcendence, and which makes self-seeking to be unacceptable as the prime standard in human estimation, in spite of the widespread rational credence which hedonistic theories hold even in contemporary culture.

Niebuhr's definition and description of "law" can be

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1. Rom. 1:23.

2. The Godly and the Ungodly (1959), pp. 141-142.

found in a number of his works.[1] "Law is distinguished by some form of restraint or coercion, or as Aquinas puts it, it is the direction to 'perform virtuous acts by reason of some outward cause."[2] "But there is also an inner compulsion of law. It is the compulsion of conscience, the force of the sense of obligation, operating against other impulses in the personality."[3] Considered objectively, "law usually represents detailed prescriptions of duties and obligations which the self owes to itself, to God, and to its neighbors."[4] Then there are general principles which command our attention, such as "that we ought to do good and avoid evil." With "pure law" or "positive law" there is a degree of detail, and this law gains its force, says Niebuhr, because it is specific in prescribing how we are to act. He holds that "even if we do not accept the Catholic theory of a highly specific 'natural law' we all do accept principles of justice which transcend the positive enactments of historic states and which are less specific and not so sharply defined as positive law, and yet more specific than the law of love."[1] The law of love, then, is a vague and general obligation which is not truly law in the same sense as the rest of the law, because it is a transcendent norm which defies full application in terms of human obedience to it.

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[1] Specifically in Human Destiny (1943) and Christian Realism and Political Problems (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953).

[2] Christian Realism and Political Problems (1953), p. 147.

[3] Ibid., pp. 147-148.

[4] Ibid., p. 148. In another place, Niebuhr relates obligations and law:
"Systems and principles of justice are the servants and instruments of the spirit of brotherhood insofar as they extend the sense of obligation towards the other, (a) from an immediately felt obligation, prompted by obvious need, to a continued obligation expressed in fixed principles of mutual support; (b) from a simple relation between a self and one 'other' to the complex relations of the self and the 'others'; and (c) finally from the obligations, discerned by the individual self, to the wider obligations which the community defines from its more impartial perspective. These communal definitions evolve slowly in custom and in law. They all contain some higher elements of disinterestedness, which would not be possible to the individual self," (Human Destiny, 1943, p. 248).

In his response to the criticism of Paul Ramsey that Niebuhr had mistakenly made love to transcend law in the objective as well as the subjective sphere, Niebuhr says:

> I accept his criticism that love is never beyond law in the objective sphere. I tried to make the transcendence of love over law to mean the indeterminacy of love as against the determinate obligations which are defined in natural law. I still think that this is a valid point, but I should not have tried to cover it with the idea of "love beyond law."[2]

Niebuhr also had been concerned to dissociate himself from the Roman Catholic idea that agape is simply an additional law to be obeyed, and that it can be obeyed as one of the cardinal virtues. At any rate, it is clear that in

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1. See Christian Realism and Political Problems (1953), p. 148.

2, Kegley and Bretall (1956), p. 434.

Niebuhr's view love and law exist in a dialectical relationship. Love is the ethical definition of the religious absolute, adding both height and depth to the rational moral experience, in terms of a practical flexibility in men's attitude toward laws and of the rise of human power.[1] Love is both the fulfillment and the end of law, "as fulfilling all possibilities of law and yet as standing in contradiction to it."[2]

The ways in which love transcends law reflect the subjective aspects of Niebuhr's analysis of human personality: (1) Man is transcendent in freedom over his historical situation; (2) the human self transcends all legal requirements which may be set against it; (4) the self transcends law in its personal relationships, such as in an empathetic relationship.[3] And yet objectively (andeven subjectively, for also in the inward being of man this truth applies) love can never completely transcend "law" in the sense that human nature has certain "laws" of its existence. Thus Niebuhr defines

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1. Cf. Reflections on the End of an Era (1934), pp. 114-115, and Faith and History (1949), p. 195.

2. Christian Realism and Political Problems (1953), p. 149. This is to be understood as true of subjective, but not of material or objective law. It is the subjective law which is the source of objective obedience, however, and Niebuhr's considerations of law begin with an analysis of the self and its decisions.

3. Cf. Ibid., pp. 154-170.

law in terms of man's essential nature.[1] He also makes agape to be an essential law of human nature, because by nature the human self cannot fulfill itself, and it requires the relationships established by love in order even to continue to exist in normalcy. Love is thus the law of man's being, the very structure of his freedom. For human nature is a "realm of infinite possibilities" for good or evil; this is freedom, and it is to this freedom that agape speaks.

Niebuhr's conception of pure religion is essentially a blend of relatively orthodox or "neo-orthodox" theological insights with a revolutionary social outlook. It is a dialectical religion, revolving upon the dialectic of love with law. In respect to the "relevance" of the "impossible" ethical ideal of agape, Niebuhr says:

> Prophetic Christianity faces the difficulty that its penetration into the total and ultimate human situation complicates the problem of dealing with the immediate moral and social situations which all men must face. The common currency of the moral life is constituted of the 'nicely calculated less and more' of the relatively good and the relatively evil. Human happiness in ordinary intercourse is determined by the difference between a little more and a little less justice, a little more and a little less freedom, between varying degrees of imaginative insight with which the self enters the life and understands the interests of the neighbor. Prophetic Christianity, on the other hand, demands the impossible; and by that very demand emphasizes the impotence and corruption of human nature, wresting from man the cry of distress and contrition, "The good that I would, I do not do; but the evil that

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[1] Cf. Ibid., pp. 154-155.

I would not, that I do."[1]

Niebuhr sees his Prophetic Christianity as in tension against both secular and orthodox Christian outlooks. His strictures against "liberal" attitudes are well known, but he tends to identify with the secular as well as with the orthodox Christian point of view, at least in terms of his ethical outlook.[2] He insists on the relevance of agape, which he believes to be in contrast to the position of "orthodox Christianity." He accuses the orthodox position of a pessimistic outlook that "affirms the . .. absurd proposition that sin has completely destroyed all truth and justice."[3] He sides with Catholic critics of this "pessimism," who have accused it of "obscurantism in culture and antinomianism in morals; and it would be difficult to estimate to what degree our present anarchy is due to Protestant errors."[4]

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[1] An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935), p. 97. Cf. Rom. 7:19.

[2] "In so far as liberal Christianity is a compound of prophetic religion and secularism it is drawn into the debate in a somewhat equivocal position but, on the whole, on the side of the secularists and naturalists," (ibid., p. 98). Let us note again that Niebuhr has of late repudiated the views of this work, although it may safely be observed that his later outlook is not radically dissimilar, as regards the necessity for revolutionary social measures, at least.

[3] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Christian Faith and Natural Law," Theology (February, 1940). Republished in Love and Justice, p. 51.

[4] Ibid.

And yet Niebuhr considers himself to be a part of orthodox tradition; its salvation in his eyes is that it is from the Protestant perspective that the critical tendencies which are so germane to his "prophetic Christianity" come.

His criticism of orthodoxy is even more direct and specific:

> Christian orthodoxy failed to derive any significant politico-moral principles from the law of love. It did not realize that the law of love is not only in position of ultimate transcendence over all moral achievements, but that it suggests possibilities which immediately transcend any achievements of justice by which society has integrated its life. It therefore destroyed a dynamic relationship between the ideal of love and the principles of justice. The social principles of orthodox Christianity have, consequently, been determined by ideals of justice which were informed by reverence for the principle of order rather than by the attraction of the ideal of love.[1]

It is important for an understanding of Niebuhr's ethical thought to have a proper knowledge of his estimation of natural law. His assessment of this concept must be seen in relation to his appreciation for the ethical ideal.

It is not the case that Niebuhr is critical of the notion of natural law per se. He believes that it retains a certain validity, inasmuch as there do exist valid universal principles, and because human society must needs avail itself of this structural means of keeping order and averting chaos. Natural law theories are rational efforts to apply the moral

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1. An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935), p. 131.

obligation imposed by the love commandment to a complex and relative world.[1] There are certain "ad hoc restraints" which are necessary to normal human intercourse, and these are generally known as "natural law," or "unwritten law."[2] But he is quite critical of natural law "systems" which seek to impose a strict rational code of ethics upon the human scene. This attempt does not do justice to the whole of human personality. While it recognizes that there are indeed "structures" in human nature to which the theory of natural law pays tribute, a strict rational code built upon these structures overlooks the element of freedom and change which is also every bit as much a part of this nature. Natural law theories are in error when they try to incorporate the changing and contingent elements into a general and rigid norm.[3] The trouble with these theories, then, is that they are built upon a faulty and inadequate understanding of human nature.[4]

Also, as we have seen, particular natural law theories are at fault in that they attempt to make that which is relative into absolutes. Natural law is discerned by a relatively permanent structure of human personality, namely reason. But

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1. Cf. Faith and History (1949), pp. 188-189.
2. Cf. Love and Justice (article 1940), p. 54.
3. See Faith and History (1949), pp. 180-183.
4. See Human Nature (1941), pp. 270-271.

in Niebuhr's estimation, reason participates in relativity and sin just as much as do the other aspects of man's capacity. Therefore no rational norm can be absolute for man. The claim of finality for natural law ideals

> rests upon untenable faith in the purity of reason; and it is merely another of the many efforts which men make to find a vantage point of the unconditioned in history. The effect of this pretended finality of "natural law" is obvious. It raises "ideology" to a higher degree of pretension, and is another of the many illustrations in history of the force of sin in the claim of sinlessness.[1]

The principal modern representative of natural law is of course Roman Catholic moral philosophy. This theory is based on a view of human nature which assumes that man is in possession of an ability to achieve natural justice through his rational capacities to know an intelligible and rational universe. Niebuhr feels that the Roman view does not do justice to the ethical ideal of love, because it depends too largely upon the rational capacity for natural justice. Perfect justice, he says, must be defined in terms of perfect love, rather than in terms of ontological structures which have been adopted from classical Greek philosophy. "Man is neither as completely bereft of 'original justice' nor as completely in possession of 'natural justice' as the Catholic theory assumes."[2] For Niebuhr, man's "natural justice" is

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1. Human Destiny (1943), p. 253.

2. Love and Justice (article 1940), p. 50.

corrupt and relative and therefore unfit to be made the central aspect of Christian ethics. It overlooks the element of freedom in human nature, and said freedom requires a "law" which is above the laws of nature as understood only by human reason.

There is a dialectical relationship, a relationship of tension, in Niebuhr's consideration of the ethical ideal and law. He would disavow undue emphasis upon either concept in an effort to arrive at a balanced system of Christian ethics. His strictures against both "legalism" and "relativism" are important at this point. He rejects legalism because it does an injustice to the fluctuating and relative milieu of history by insinuating one element of rational coherence, which is itself a part of relative history, as an absolute normative system.[1] Legalism is too inflexible and too specific to be able to meet the complex and varied demands of social justice and personal moral living. To develop a system of casuistry is only to compound the problem without abating the difficulties in the lives of people who must strive to adapt themselves in their freedom to a bound and fixed ethical code. An yet Niebuhr finds real value in the presence of "laws" or ethical principles around which the Christian may build his own life. If natural law theory is in error, relativism is equally in the wrong in denying every general moral norm. Niebuhr refutes both "secular theory" and "Lutheran orthodoxy," which he believes are sources of a relativistic antinomianism. Secular moral theory is relativistic as the fruit of "an extreme naturalistic empiricism." Lutheran orthodoxy tends toward relativism or cynicism, thinks Niebuhr, because it "tends to regard reason as so completely involved in the corruption of sin that it has no confidence in any 'natural law' norms."[1]

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[1] See Faith and History (1949), p. 194.

Niebuhr finds a dialectical resolution to the tangled problem of the relative and the absolute in theorizing that the "law of love itself" is the best defense against relativism. For this is the "final law," and all other laws are expressions of it.[2] His conclusion is that law is not fixed, but flexible. But yet it is necessary in social affairs. Flexibility is conferred upon human law by the element of love which is injected into the human environment by the love ideal, through faith. "It is not possible to define an essential structure of community except the law of love."[3] The law of love is absolute in its demands for "equality and freedom," but it turns out to be relative, in every application to history. "On the subjective side, love is a curious compound of willing through the strength of the sense of obligation and of willing not by the strength of our will but by the strength which enters the will through grace."[1]

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[1] See Human Nature (1941), p. 284.

[2] Cf. Christian Realism and Political Problems (1953), p. 173.

[3] Kegley and Bretall (1956), p. 436.

> There are no precise distinctions either between relative and absolute natural law, as there are none between natural law and the law of love, for the simple reason that the freedom of spirit is so enmeshed in the necessities of nature, and the health and sickness of that freedom are so involved in each other, that it is not possible to make rules isolating certain aspects of nature and sin without having them disturbed by the claims of the law of love as the requirement of freedom.
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> Yet it is better to make these distinctions, however arbitrary, than to dispense with them entirely as modern utopians do. The Christian utopians think they can dispense with all structures and rules of justice by fulfilling the law of love. They do not realize that the law of love stands on the edge of history and not in history, that it represents an ultimate and not an immediate possibility.[2]

Niebuhr believes that a valid Christian ethic is possible within Protestantism, where there is possible a strong "sense of the individual occasion," coupled with the knowledge that the only absolute norm for man's decisions is the will of God, and a sense of the uniqueness of the individual. The crucial insight to be maintained is that there must be responsibility always at the center of Christian occasionalism. Protestants are too often tempted into a "romantic defiance

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1. Christian Realism and Political Problems (1953), p. 153.

2. Human Nature (1941), pp. 297-298.

of all rational and traditional norms in the sphere of politics and morals," forgetting that to the scriptural promise "all things are yours" is connected the cautionary "but ye are Christ's."[1] The tension between love and law, in the last analysis, fits Niebuhr's analysis of the human self:

> The law of love is the final law for man in his condition of finiteness and freedom because man in his freedom is unable to make himself in his finiteness his own end. The self is too great to be contained within itself in its smallness.[2]
>
> Since the human self is not simply free spirit, transcending its finite conditions in indeterminate degree, but a creature subject to natural and historical limitations, it is subject to other law, subordinate to the law of love.[3]

Resources for achieving a better society

Part of the value of religious faith for contemporary society, in Niebuhr's viewpoint, is that within faith there is carried an absolute ethical ideal or goal. The function of an ethical ideal, again, is that it allows a thinker to transcend his own relative ethic to the degree, at least, that he is able to see the limited nature of his own cultural values and yet be challenged to achieve higher approximations of the transcendent norm. In other words, the faith-developed ideal makes for an ethical tension, wherein man recognizes that all things have both their source and fulfillment in God.[1] This is a tension which helps prevent man from lapsing into either despair of making things better or complacency for having achieved certain ends.

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[1] See ibid., pp. 60-61. The reference is I Cor. 3:21-23.

[2] Faith and History (1949), p. 174.

[3] Cf. An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935), pp. 136-138.

So religious ideals are necessary in order that the evil in human nature will not hold sway in social intercourse and in personal moral attainments. The presence of the ideal, even though it may not and cannot ever fully be implemented, prevents any purely rationalistic ethic from consigning man to the "sands of complete relativism."[2] The perspective of a faith-derived ethic allows man to decide and act purposively within history, conscious that his decisions can be valid, that he can act with vigor and moral rectitude, and that he can make a positive contribution for good in his own time.

In social and political problems, Christian faith provides perspective by setting "all propositions of justice under the law of love, resolving the fruitless debate between pragmatists and legalists and creating the freedom and maneuverability necessary to achieve a tolerable accord between men and nations in ever more complex human relations."[3]

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[1] Cf. An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935), pp. 136-138.

[2] Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932), p. 222.

[3] Christian Realism and Political Problems (1953), p. 110.

Niebuhr believes that the United States holds a position of unique responsibility and possibility for leadership in achieving this "tolerable accord" among men and among nations in our day. He thinks that a realistic religious faith can contribute to the validity of this moral and political leadership by being more than an "irresponsible idealism" which "forgets that our immediate responsibility is to avoid catastrophe and to secure a tolerable peace in a world filled with acute tensions."[1] "Faith must be revealed not as a simple idealism but as a source of dealing responsibly with all the vicissitudes of life under the guidance of an absolute commitment to God as revealed in Christ."[2]

Since faith is an "absolute commitment to God," it is prevented from falling into the trap of self-righteousness toward which "simple idealism" tends. Niebuhr attributes this sort of error to liberal Christianity: "The failure of liberal Christianity is derived from its inclination to invest the relative moral standards of a commercial age with ultimate sanctity by falsely casting the aura of the absolute and transcendent ethic of Jesus upon them."[3] There is no historical method or code of ethics, in Niebuhr's view, which

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1. An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935), p. 10. From his preface to the 1956 edition.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p. 19.

is free from the taint of sin. Each is bound in relativism, and it is a presumption and a tragic mistake to regard them as absolutes. And Christian faith, if rightly understood, can preserve the realistic balance which would prevent this presumptuous mistake.

> The Christian doctrine of original sin. . . . makes an important contribution to any adequate social and political theory the lack of which has robbed bourgeois theory of real wisdom; for it emphasizes a fact which every page of human history attests. . . . There is no level of human moral or social achievement in which there is not some corruption of inordinate self-love.[1]

The religious absolute, the love ideal, becomes involved in the complexities of attempting to find approximations of itself in the realities of social justice. It aids individual and corporate selves to transcend themselves by espousing the cause and the interests of others. The achievement of tolerable situations of justice "is always partially an achievement of our love for the other, and partially a result of our yielding to his demands and pressures."[2] The ideal of justice is the highest level to which man in his collective life can aspire, and justice is also an "intermediate level" which the individual must attain before he can go further toward fulfilling the absolute demands to self-sacrifice which the love ideal puts upon him. So love both fulfills and contradicts justice. Love is necessary for justice fully to be justice.

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[1] The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness (1944), pp. 16-17.

[2] Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Christian Faith and the World Crisis," Christianity and Crisis (February 10, 1941). Republished in Love and Justice, p. 282.

Politically, justice is attained through a tension between the twin perils of anarchy and tyranny. Niebuhr thinks "it is . . . the business of a Christian to preserve some relative decency and justice in society against the tyranny and injustice into which society may fall. He cannot do this without supporting relative standards of justice against the threats of anarchy and injustice."[1] These political opposites cannot be resolved one into the other, for to accomplish such a resolution would make for political injustice. Niebuhr makes use of the Christian concept of "justification by faith" in describing the most helpful attitude toward this paradox in political life:

> Whatever may be the source of our insights into the problems of the political order, it is important both to recognize the higher possibilities of justice in every historic situation, and to know that the twin perils of tyranny and anarchy can never be completely overcome in any political achievement. These perils are expressions of the sinful elements of conflict and dominion, standing in contradiction to the ideal of brotherhood on every level of communal organization. There is no possibility of making history completely safe against either occasional conflicts of vital interests (war) or against the misuse of the power which is intended to prevent such conflict of interests (tyranny). To understand this is to labor for the higher justice in terms of the experience of

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[1] Love and Justice (article 1940), p. 270.

> justification by faith. Justification by faith in the realm of justice means that we will not regard the pressures and counter pressures, the tensions, the overt and the covert conflicts by which justice is achieved and maintained, as normative in the absolute sense; but neither will we ease our conscience by seeking to escape from involvement in them. We will know that we cannot purge ourselves of the sin and guilt in which we are involved by the moral ambiguities of politics without also disavowing responsibility for the creative possibilities of justice.[1]

Something of the nature of the practical implications of understanding social justice paradoxically can be seen in Niebuhr's discussion of the treatment of criminals within society. He insists that it is not necessary that those who punish be completely guiltless before they can assess the guilt of a criminal and administer sentence upon him.

> The society which punishes criminals is never so conscious as it might be of the degree to which it is tainted with, and responsible for, the very sins which it abhors and punishes. Yet an unqualified insistence upon guiltlessness as a prerequisite of the right to punish would invalidate every measure required for the maintenance of social order.[2]

This is his insight that all moral codes are relative and imperfect, but that absoluteness and perfection cannot be demanded if the desired "tolerable justice" is to be achieved. Ethical relativity is robbed of some of its sting, if not of its factuality, by this realization. Niebuhr believes that religious faith, with its ideal of love, contributes insights

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1. Human Destiny (1943), p. 284.

2. An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935), pp. 51-52.

which serve to maintain the actual balance of justice in both politics and social concerns.[1]

So the insights of Christian faith are relevant to both personal and social ethics in several ways. In addition to the more obvious way in which there is a high ethical ideal, love, set over against all human achievements as a contradiction and fulfillment, Christian faith "clarifies" the human situation, making for better understanding of man's social life so that social problems and conflicts may be faced realistically and with a real hope for improvement. Thus "the revelation of the 'Cross of Christ' does not superimpose, but merely clarifies, the truth about man's situation when ultimately considered": that the self is bound to destroy itself by self-seeking, that it must forget itself to realize itself, that this cannot be calculated in advance.[2] This is a built-in norm for individual selves, "a norm which is given by the very constitution of selfhood." The Cross of Christ reveals this norm to individuals for their self-understanding and for their understanding of other selves.[3]

The Cross also symbolizes the fact that in man's life, as a part of universal human experience, is a note of tragedy.

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1. See Ibid., p. 192.

2. See The Self and the Dramas of History (1955), p. 232. This is Niebuhr's "by-product" theory. He cites Matt. 10:30. Cf. Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932), pp. 56-57.

3. Ibid.

"Life is tragic and the most perfect type of moral beauty inevitably has at least a touch of the tragic in it." Man is able to anticipate and long for ethical goals and objects which are too high for him. He strives to reach them, but always fails.[1]

Faith-derived self-knowledge helps the individual to achieve self-respect and a critical competence to transcend social custom and tradition.[2] Faith communicates to the self an understanding of its own responsibility and guilt, together with the appreciation that other selves are similarly made and reside in a similar situation. This makes a meaningful and responsible personal ethic possible. Faith also grants the restraints of modesty and patience which help the individual to control his own situation for the better.[3] Men are bound together by the knowledge that each one has elements of "human frailty," and that "all human life" has a "transcendent worth." Niebuhr believes that these insights create "attitudes which transcend social conflict and thus mitigate its cruelties." Vices and virtues are held in common. The Christian faith teaches this, and makes possible a transforming "repentance" which recognizes evil in the self and yields to the impulses of love which can make of all men brothers.[1]

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[1] See Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic (1929), pp. 85-87, from a "leaf" penned in 1925. This reference is from the 1964 printing by the World Publishing Company.

[2] Cf. The Self and the Dramas of History (1955), pp. 223-227, passim.

[3] Cf. ibid., pp. 157-159.

The Christian Church has the task of communicating this "Gospel of redemption" to humanity. The redemption is efficacious for collectives and nations as well as for individuals.

> It is possible to live truly if we die to self, if the vainglory of man is broken by divine judgment that life may be truly reformed by divine grace. This promise of new life is for individuals; yet who can deny its relevance for nations and empires, for civilizations and cultures also, even though these collective forms of life do not have the exact integrity of the individual soul; nor do they have as direct an access to divine judgment and grace?[2]

As befits its faith, the church proclaims a dialectical message; judgment to the complacent and hope for those who are under judgment.[3] Niebuhr insists that these insights come only from within the perspective of religious faith. Secular and purely rationalistic systems of ethics fail to understand the true nature of the human self: that it has possibilities for great evil as well as for good. Religion serves to control human pride, whether individual or collective, and turn it into responsibility.

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1. Cf. Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932), pp. 254-255 and Reinhold Niebuhr, "Can the Church Give a Moral Lead?", Christianity and Crisis (August 2, 1948), as cited in Essays in Applied Christianity, p. 92.

2. Christian Realism and Political Problems (1953), p. 111.

3. Cf. ibid., p. 112.

> There is no cure for the pride of a virtuous nation but pure religion. . . . The pride of a virtuous nation cannot be humbled by moral and political criticism because in comparative terms it may actually be virtuous. . . . A contrite recognition of our own sins destroys the illusion of eminence through virtue and lays the foundation for the apprehension of 'grace' in our national life.[1]

The primary task of the Church is to "raise and answer religious questions" within the framework of which the moral, social, and political issues of "unparalleled urgency" in our time can be solved. These religious questions have to do with the meaning of life and history and human nature. Niebuhr thinks that these questions have been falsely answered in modern culture, in the assumption that the meaning of life was to be found within "the historical process," in terms of progress. This progress has proved to be a blind alley.

> We believed in progress. Now we find that an atomic bomb stands at the end of the technical development. And at the end of the hoped for rational-moral progress we find little statesmen, representing little nations, drawing pretensions of omniscience from their military omnipotence, and playing with the powder which might blow up the world.[2]

The Christian faith, as properly understood, is a combination of idealistic hopes and goals, realistic norms, and pragmatic virtues. It is necessarily idealistic in that no society can have "the courage to conquer despair and attempt the impossible" unless it possesses "the ultrarational hopes and passions of religion."

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[1] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Anglo-Saxon Destiny and Responsibility," Christianity and Crisis (October 4, 1943). Republished in Love and Justice, pp. 186-187.

[2] "Can the Church Give a Moral Lead?", Essays in Applied Christianity (1948), p. 88.

> The vision of a just society is an impossible one, which can be approximated only by those who do not regard it as impossible. The truest visions of religion are illusions, which may be partially realized by being resolutely believed. For what religion believes to be true is not wholly true but ought to be true; and may become true if its truth is not doubted.[1]

Thus Christian idealism can help society to improve itself by holding out goals for which it can reach, even though the full realization of those goals may forever be beyond its grasp.

The kind of realism which Niebuhr ascribes to the Christian outlook is that in which human nature is understood in its double aspect of transcendence and sinfulness. In his transcendence, man "is troubled with visions of the absolute," able to discern the ideals which are truly beyond his status as man to implement, but which are nevertheless for him realities which he knows and seeks. In his sinfulness, man is led to mistake human norms and achievements as absolutes. He is most dangerous when he pretends to be God or to have possession of some absolute standard of virtue and wisdom." This paradoxical double aspect of his nature, being misunderstood by most of modern culture, is a source of great confusion. For man allows himself to be "torn by the contradictory impulses to subject his finite life to someone or something greater than himself, but also to claim the possession of some unconditioned ground of virtue and wisdom from which he surveys his fellow men and holds them in contempt." It is a false realism of our age which leads to the belief that either sub-rational vitalities or basic economic causes are at the root of all injustices which involve the misuse of human powers. Modern culture, priding itself in its faculties of reason, is, because of its narrow "reasonableness", led to attribute all fanaticism to "outmoded" religious belief.[1]

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[1] Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932), p. 81.

The "norms" which are revealed to the man of religious faith are truly realistic, for faith, in addition to providing the "impossible" ideals which perpetually contradict and negate the highest achievements of man, also provides the confidence in "a divine mercy which understands us in the inevitable contradiction in which even the most perfect life is involved." Man does not stand alone; he does not have to justify his own actions, but he is supplied with assurance that he is at least understood. "When this fact is clearly understood about the individual self, one of the main sources of confusion about the demands of individual conscience and political morality is removed."[1] Armed with this kind of faith-guided realism, then, human communities can work to "balance and beguile" the ineradicable self-interests, and to achieve the necessary "tolerable harmony and justice" without which a community cannot persist.[2]

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[1] See The Self and the Dramas of History (1955), pp. 157-158 for all quotations and most ideas in this par.

Christian faith contributes to a proper pragmatic interpretation of social advancement. Progress is always limited, in his viewpoint, because instead of naïve optimism there exists the hope of a social equilibrium in which there are order, happiness, and harmony, because human propensities for evil are balanced off or held in abeyance. Given such a situation, a "progressively higher justice and more stable peace can be achieved."[3] Niebuhr believes that "we need a pragmatic attitude toward every institution of property and of government, recognizing that none of them are as sacrosanct as some supposedly Christian or secular system of law has made them."[4] To be sure, such a hope is limited in its this-worldly aspects, for "there is no way of transmuting the Christian Gospel into a system of historical optimism." But be that as it may, "we do have responsibility for proximate

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1. See *ibid.*, p. 233.
2. Cf. *ibid.*
3. *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), p. 256.
4. *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (1953), p. 110.

victories." "We can neither renounce this earthly home of ours nor yet claim that its victories and defeats give the final meaning to our existence."[1] Niebuhr's pragmatic realism in this regard is well summed up in this quotation from one of his later works:

> A valid moral outlook must be based upon an honest regard for the facts in the human situation, and must not construct norms which are impossible to achieve in view of the persistence and the power of man's self-concern, and more particularly of his collective self-concern. It is obviously wrong for either the individual or the group to pursue its interests consistently without regard for the interest of other individuals or groups who are bound to it in the bundle of life. It is also wrong to claim a larger measure of disinterestedness than is possible for either individual or groups. But it is possible for both individuals and groups to relate concern for the other with interest and concern for the self.[2]

What religious faith supplies to human life is "a sense of the absolute."[3] According to Niebuhr, Jesus the Christ lived as the expression of "the religious sense that the absolute invades the relative and the historical."[4] What religion provides is a sense of the absolute, rather than of the highest imaginable human aspiration or achievement. The religious sense reaches beyond historical relativity, in which all human beings are involved, so that a perspective

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1. Ibid., pp. 115-116.

2. The Structure of Nations and Empires (1959), p. 30.

3. Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932), p. 52.

4. Reflections on the End of an Era (1934), p. 287.

is reached from which no human action can any longer be justified in terms of some historic purpose or made to seem virtuous in comparison to some less ethical behavior. It is admissibly true that very often this sense of the absolute has been corrupted "in terms of faulty moral insights," dressed and paraded as the absolute itself. But Niebuhr believes that, despite this actuality, "there is a general development in the high religions toward an interpretation of the divine as benevolent will, and a consequent increase of condemnation upon all selfish actions and desires."[1] Religious faith is also effective as a correction to and ideal for human moral attitudes in that the religious conscience feels obligations toward another personal being. "It uses the symbols derived from human personality to describe the absolute and it finds them morally potent."[2] History is not wholly normative for man; this is the significance of the Christian ethic. The "law of love" is an absolute which transcends the human sphere. But it also is relevant for human communities as they painfully work their way toward pragmatic solutions for the problems of human justice which plague them. In spite of all of his "realism" and his "pessimistic outlook" on human social accomplishments, Niebuhr is

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1. Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932), p. 52.

2. Ibid.

an optimist who holds to a pragmatic conception of a progressive improvement of social situations brought about in part by the religious absolutes which faith supplies.

iv Relativity and Beyond

The thought of Reinhold Niebuhr provides much fruit for a study of the question of the relation between the relative and the absolute in ethics. His writings contain numerous direct references to this problem, and in fact the greater part of his entire written effort can be seen to fit within its scope.

It is evident that Niebuhr bases his ethical thought upon his doctrine of man. Man is a creature who by nature is thoroughly enmeshed in relativity. But it is also apparent in his thinking that being convinced about the factuality of human relativity does not entail an acceptance of theoretical relativism. To the contrary, Niebuhr insists that relativism is refutable as an ethical alternative, and that if it is followed relativism will issue in results which are undesirable in society.

Human thought and history are relative

Although it is unnecessary fully to reiterate what has hitherto been demonstrated concerning Niebuhr's analysis of human nature, it is appropriate at this point to summarize the basic relevant points of his doctrine.

Man is a creature, limited in his nature. That nature is both physical and spiritual, a unity in each man or self. Man is unique in that he is created in "God's image," which means that a correct self-understanding will reveal a measure of self-transcendence. Human nature is both "natural" and transcendent beyond that "natural" state. This self-transcendence not only enables man to exceed animal nature in ability to be self-conscious, but it also is the structure of thought and being which makes man capable of sinning.

Sin is to be understood, says Niebuhr, not just as ignorance or in the sense of a totality of evil actions, but rather as an elaboration of self-consciousness into self-interest, a condition which man can never escape even in the most transcendent aspect of his "nature." It is human nature to be a creature that is limited and relative. It is within human nature to be able to recognize one's own finiteness and to long for that finiteness to cease. Thus the creature is led to rebel against his creator. He has the freedom to do so--also as a result of his self-transcendent nature. The combination of finiteness and freedom composes a predisposition for creaturely rebellion, which eventually takes the form of self-deification and pretension to absoluteness. Sin occurs as a denial of one's limitation, but sin cannot remove the condition of relativity. The self's highest achievements and insights, even though they be the result of a measure of self-transcendence, are never absolute, since they are *self*-achieved, and therefore always relative to the *self*, rather than to the absolute.

It is necessary to reiterate at this point that sin is also to be understood as self-contradiction, for it is likewise within the structure of human nature to be able to love. Indeed, love is a "law" of that very nature. For the self always seeks and needs a fulfillment which, paradoxically, it cannot find within itself. It is a part of human sin that the self tries to fulfill itself within itself, denying its need and obligation to love the other. The self is bound to fail in this quest for self-fulfillment, says Niebuhr, and he builds on "the law of love" in his theory concerning the way relativity and sin can be overcome.

Human history, since it is properly to be understood as the "dramatic" result of the activity of human selfhood, is likewise bound in the same paradoxical situation of sin and relativity. In some sense, societies are elaborations of the human self, having similar capabilities of and predispositions toward self-interest, but not having equal capabilities of recognizing and overcoming the evil results of that self-interest. Collective man sins, and individual man is always a part of collective sin, for he is also collective man. Niebuhr understands collective sin as dramatic and personal, since it is individual "actors" who perform on the stage of historical drama. Societies develop social and political ideologies in history, ideologies which the societies pretend are absolute, though in fact they are not. Social sin appears as an ideological "taint" which is the attempt to make absolute what can never be more than relative. Social injustice, strife, and unrest are the results of collective, as well as of individual sin.

A "refutation" of relativism

Relativity does not necessarily produce relativistic consequences, thinks Niebuhr. The very characteristic of human "nature" which is the structure predisposing man to sin and relativity, that transcendence which produces self-interest and anxiety, is also the characteristic through which the refutation of relativism comes. For man, in his ability to comprehend an ultimate end and meaning for his existence, likewise can discern his own finiteness. It is this very discernment, which is often his occasion for rebellion, that can also be an occasion for responding to that which he interprets as absolute. Transcendent self-consciousness carries within it a need to find and be absolute, and it also carries a possibility for approximating the absolute which it seeks, even within the inescapable relativity of history. Man must seek to achieve this approximation, according to Niebuhr, if his life is to have meaning and if his actions are to make ethical sense.

This transcendence constantly issues in ideals, principles, laws, and customs which, although they are inevitably tainted with sin and thus thoroughly relative, nevertheless do have historical validity amid the contingencies in which they arise. There are certain moral obligations which Niebuhr believes derive from this self-transcendence and which therefore are a part of the valid structure of human nature and experience. There exist "fairly universal" proscriptions of some types of behavior, such as murder, theft, and adultery. These negative principles of morals are not only universal, but they are "objective" in the sense that individuals within societies can agree upon their specific content. Even though there may be great diversity in the way in which the principles are interpreted, Niebuhr finds a refutation of relativism in the fact that there is some universal and objective agreement that certain types of behavior need social control. Such "moral law" is grounded within the structure of personality in both its individual and social aspects. Niebuhr holds that human nature does not change or vary in its basic structure, so that the moral obligations are felt within each normal human experience, even though interpretations and explications of those obligations evidence relativity.

Niebuhr consequently believes that various types of cultural relativism are refutable, since they fail to take account of very basic "facts" concerning human nature and its experience of moral obligations. Relativism tends to produce cynicism, and he considers both relativism and cynicism to be moral abdication in the face of the pressing needs of society for guidance and for solution of its ethical problems. Man the individual is also man the participant in society, needing society for self-fulfillment and informing society with an individual moral sense, to which by its character of generality society can never fully respond. And yet even in society there lies something beyond a complete relativism. In the social structures and the "constant tendencies" which societies exhibit there appears something of a social self-transcendence[1] which makes social ethical obligations valid, even though they are relative in content and always subject to change.

Niebuhr contends that contemproary "evolutionary" versions of ethical relativism are inadequate and therefore refutable on two counts: (1) they usually accept implicitly some Christian norm which they are careful to reject explicitly; and (2) they underestimate the complexity of the social problem surrounding the controversy over the values of freedom and order. The result is a hasty reconciliation of these values which usually involves subsuming one into the other or sacrificing one to the other. Thus the ethical tension which is necessary to a "balanced" social order is lost, and "extremist" types of injustice, either anarchy or tyranny, obtain. At any rate, Niebuhr believes that the current types of ethical cynicism, skepticism, and relativism are "only provisional," rather than consistent and thoroughgoing, in that those who debunk false absolutisms (whether the absolutisms are Christian or idealistic) and point out the facts of relativity are observed to offer only newer and altered "absolutes" in their place.[1]

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[1] This is not Niebuhr's term, but it seems applicable to his thought.

A full awareness and acceptance of human relativity must issue not in a thoroughgoing relativism, but rather in an openness to the correction and fulfillment which only absolute ideals can supply. Relativity, far from eliminating absolutes, demands them! Relativism, however, leads directly into skepticism and at least in the direction of nihilism. And nihilism is socially unthinkable, as far as Niebuhr is concerned. Ethical well-being depends utterly upon the presence of meaning in life, and meaning is defined in terms of a frame of reference. Such a frame is not only desirable, but actually unavoidable for man, thinks Niebuhr. Ethical and epistemological relativism are therefore to be rejected

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1. Cf. Faith and History (1949), pp. 186-189. Niebuhr cites Marxists in particular as examples of those who debunk false absolutes. See pp. 186-187.

because they do not meet the theoretical needs of human nature and because they result in undesirable situations at the practical level.

Existentialist or subjective types of relativism are objectionable for similar reasons. The individual self is structured so that it cannot fulfill itself. Freedom cannot change the structure of man's being.[1] Even were self-fulfillment in isolation from other persons possible, relativism and consequent nihilism would require the individual to make a superhuman effort to survive without the benefit of an absolute. And in this extremity the self is still within the aegis of an absolute, albeit a self-created absolute for which there can exist no guarantee beyond the self. At any rate, Niebuhr's definition of the structure of the self precludes the possibility of self-fulfillment in isolation. Within human nature there is found both permanence and freedom, a condition which accounts for the paradoxical relevance of the absolute within the relative. It is a fact of selfhood that man reaches toward ultimates. Man's reason, being a faculty of the self, participates in this reaching, and herein lies great significance for ethics.

Relativity overcome

It is not just in the fact that man reaches toward ultimates that the significance for ethics lies. There is significance also in that through reaching he achieves a measure of success. For the mind in its transcendence over nature arrives at a vantage point from which it can review its own limitations and the limitations of all natural creatures. This reaching and achieving distinguish man from the brutes, and make ethics both a possibility and a necessity. And in spite of the fact that it is the entire self and not just the rational faculty which is transcendent, it is with his rational faculty that man recognizes his situation and strives to fulfill himself in an organized manner. Relativity is a situation wherein there is lack of ultimate meaning. Meaning, though it borders on mystery as well as on clarity, is understood and elaborated in terms of reason. And meaning in relation to human behavior is ethics.

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[1] See *ibid.*, p. 173. Niebuhr mentions especially "modern French existentialism" in this discussion.

Niebuhr insists that the postulation of a real transcendence, in the sense of contact with and contemplation of God, is necessary to any ethic which does justice to human nature and has validity for that nature. Therefore he is dissatisfied with various "humanistic" and "naturalistic" solutions to the problem of the relative and the absolute in ethics, for they try to solve the problem in terms of the natural order alone. His ethical viewpoint is basically that of the pragmatist, in that his elaborations of the implications of ethical discussion are pointed toward a this-worldly solution or amelioration of human evils. Ethics is by definition a consideration of the problems of conduct in this life rather than a plan for escape to some other life or to another realm. Niebuhr's perspective is not "other-worldly" in scope; rather, its concern is for the historical here and now. His God is the one which has entered history and has impinged upon human activity. Therefore faith in God is eminently useful within history in finding meaning and in the solution of the ethical problems of history.

So even from a pragmatic viewpoint, and perhaps especially from that viewpoint, an ethic with an emphasis on transcendence is preferable, better, truer than are the various purely humanistic and naturalistic alternatives. In Niebuhr's view, a purely humanistic ethic, even one which makes room for religion as legitimate human experience or as the expression of man's highest self-projections, will always fall short of what is required for the best ethical solution to the injustices which exist in social intercourse. He freely admits that the relativities and contingencies of society can be ameliorated in an open-ended manner through the use of reason as aided by the fruits of scientific method. Within the purview of naturalistic ethics a social perfection can be expected, one as complete as human ingenuity can ever make it. This is an optimism which is able to admit that sin obstructs and obscures progress toward the humanly-devised goal. Humanistic sin is ignorance, a condition which can be minimized and perhaps eventually eliminated; herein lies the optimism possible within naturalistic ethical theory. There are no theoretically insuperable barriers between man and a relatively perfect society within history.

But Niebuhr believes that naturalistic ethics misconstrues the facts of human nature, especially in terms of the identification of sin with ignorance. He insists that sin is very real and that it is more basic to human personality than is a mere malfunctioning of reason. Moreover, sin tends to limit the degree of perfection which it is humanly possible to achieve. Even the highest human achievements are imperfect because they are tainted by this basic, humanly inescapable sin. Thus man, in either his individual or social aspect, can never be perfect either in a relative or an absolute sense. A relative "perfection" can at best be only a "tolerable" one in which human goodness is allowed to flourish because human evil is held in check. But a naturalistic ethic, unarmed with a "realistic" picture of the structure of human nature, is too easily led into "sentimental" social pursuits, and then into early despair by the inevitable failures and corruptions which attend even the noblest of humanistically-conceived efforts. On the other hand, a transcendent religious faith provides man with both a realistic perspective in which he is not led to despair over human corruption (since he recognizes the source of corruption) and an absolute ideal which operates as a corrective to relative human idealisms and as a goal toward which to strive. An ethic of transcendence is pragmatically justifiable, since it can be workable and productive for a society of peaceable and relatively happy people in this world.[1]

It is the perspective of religion, then, which alone can provide the sense and glimpse of the absolute which is required by human relativity. The religiously-apprehended absolute is comparable to a "light shining in the darkness"[2] which illuminates the darkness and makes it meaningful. Christian _agape_ is a "pure ideal" which sheds its "white light" in a situation in which the religious consciousness of God and human sin make manifest sense.[3] The best hope for a workable ethic in which injustice can be dispelled without a greater injustice being created is one which is open to the correction and inspiration which the absolute brings to any situation of human relativity.

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[1] Cf. _The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness_ (1944), pp. 187-190.

[2] John 1:5. _In The Self and the Dramas of History_ (1955), Niebuhr uses this Scripture to describe the "specific historical drama" which has "clarified" "the divine mystery of creation and of the judgment sensed by the individual in the height of his self consciousness," and as "the key to the mercy and love of God," (p. 224).

[3] Cf. _Reflections on the End of an Era_ (1934), p. 115.

Niebuhr finds the basis for such an ethic in the Christian faith, as he interprets it. It can only be through faith that such an ethic is available, for absolutes are not apprehended by reason alone or through the epistemological results of empirical method. It is not that secular schemes of ethics do not develop exceedingly high ideals. But such ideals are never truly absolute, and thus are not truly relevant for _all_ situations. In order that an ideal be relevant for all situations, it must not be exhausted by any particular situation, that is, it must be truly absolute. In addition, secular ideals suffer from the inevitable taints of finiteness and self-interest which are so evident in every attempt toward their implementation. And without the far-sightedness which religious faith in a transcendent consummation provides, secular idealism breaks up on the rocks of failure, corruption, and consequent despair.

The Christian faith supplies for relative human approximation an absolute ideal of love which cannot be wholly captured in any human principles or be made wholly effective in the actualities of social intercourse. But it is just this "impossible" nature of the "law of love" which makes it universally applicable in proximate forms in the solution of myriads of ethical problems in concrete situations. When men attempt to implement _agape_ in a given situation, it tends to become another of the many "absolutisms" which humanity is wont to foster. The tensions of human relativity prevent a total historical implementation of agape, so that it retains its absolute character and remains relevant and applicable to all situations of history. A full recognition of this important insight, Niebuhr feels, can prevent various forms of "sentimental" and optimistic hope from taking undue hold of man's ethical endeavors. On the other hand, the belief that "approximations" of the absolute are "possible" for man, when understood, can serve to mitigate the disappointment and cynicism and skepticism which tempt man when he sees his highest ethical hopes crumble. And in faith man is able to overcome even the knowledge of his own ethical unworthiness in the hope that springs from the knowledge that God's agape means forgiveness for himself and ability on his part to forgive others.

This, then, is the kind of "meaning" which Christian faith provides for the edification of man and for implementation into his ethical discourse and practice. The "frame of reference" from which this meaning is viewed is always a relative one, for it is individual man who appropriates it whether for a personal or a social ethic. But the self's frame of meaning is also meaningful in a larger or ultimate sense in that there is a connection through faith to a larger and absolute meaning. Niebuhr holds that man finds meaning through a self-transcendent search for an absolute. Within the Christian frame of meaning, the absolute has entered human history and has united with relative man. Thus human relativities are at last meaningful in relation to the absolute and within the hope for a trans-historical fulfillment of history's incompleteness.

The great bulk of Niebuhr's ethical concern has not been for an explication of Christian theology for its own sake, but rather for an interpretation and application of the Christian ethic in relative human situations. It is in his moral situations that man discovers the workability of the "sense of the absolute" which is the essence of Christian faith. The faith-absolute is an outgoing love for other people, a love which draws no prudential or numerical boundaries, but which is universal in scope. This kind of love is a possibility for individuals, but in social considerations it must be translated into equality and justice. Niebuhr has increasingly seen the need to implement social ideals, especially in light of today's situations of international interdependence and an ultimate weapon.

In solving the problem of the relation of relative and absolute "in principle," Christian faith does not solve it by the elimination of either relative or absolute. Niebuhr insists that the solution must come by maintaining the tension between them, whereby relativity is both negated and fulfilled by absolutes, and whereby the absolute is approximated within the relative. This solution befits Niebuhr's entire methodology in theology and ethics, one in which traditional problems such as "the ideal and the real," "the many and the one," "transcendence and immanence," and "spirit and nature," are solved by dialectical means. This dialectic is the kind of thinking which Niebuhr's transcendent self does as it gains new levels of self-consciousness and consciousness of the absolute. No purely human thought can be absolute in the sense of being final or perfect. Paradoxes and epistemological tensions are the fruit of the Christian insight by which Niebuhr retains dialectically the simultaneous reality of relative and absolute.

The dialectical procedure which is native to Niebuhr's method may not be consciously Hegelian or Marxian, or even Platonic. But it is evident that Niebuhr believes it to be a thoroughly Christian approach to truth at the theoretical level. That his theory has importance for and is totally bound up with his practical and pragmatic considerations needs no further demonstration. For this is the "relevance" which makes theology, philosophy, and any theory whatever mandatory for intelligent behavior at the level of daily social interaction.

The essence of Niebuhr's ethical theory is that absolute Christian love is relevant and useful in the relative historical and social decisions and accomodations that are constantly being accomplished. It is a kind of dialectical golden mean, in which it becomes possible to avoid the undesirable consequences of ethical extremes by referring them always to the great center line of love and justice from which they may not greatly diverge. That this is no Aristotelian golden mean is evident from the fact that it is never obtainable from reason alone and indeed cannot be a purely rational norm. To the contrary, it is a norm which defies reason in its continual reference to an absolute love ideal which contains an obligation to love all mankind and be heedless of oneself.

The greatest possible achievement within history, Niebuhr holds, is an overall situation in which there exists a balance of power between the various competing forces of society. The balance must extend into every situation where a conflict of interests is possible, so that there will exist a "tolerable" justice for all concerned. An equilibrium of power is necessary because of the universal presence of sin and self-interest which colors every man-made scheme and tends to prevent the accomplishment of justice. The balance of power is a kind of practical dialectic between the various social and political antinomies such as "anarchy and tyranny," "democracy and oligarchy," "ends and means," "freedom and order," and "illusion and despair."

But though the balance of power theory may sound like a scheme to preserve the socio-political *status quo*, it is nothing of the kind. Niebuhr is an incurable social and political activist, and his ethical theory fits his practical bent. The dialectic provides plenty of justification for needed social change. And since no human solutions can be absolute, all must be subject to continual scrutiny to ensure that the balance of *justice* is maintained amid the continual flux of a thoroughly relative society. The various historical solutions achieved by Christian groups are chief among the objects of his criticism at this point, for it is tempting to claim to possess absolute truth when it is believed that God has spoken to man at definite points within history. In Niebuhr's opinion, there have resulted within Christianity various forms of absolutism which have served to perpetuate as often as to mitigate social injustice. He regards this criticism of Christian "orthodoxy" as devastating. Doctrinal orthodoxy becomes "obscurantist" and resistant to social change for the better. Theories of natural law suffer from a pretension to absoluteness which is not justified in relative human situations. And orthodoxy too often degenerates into an ethical dualism which fails to find the absolute in the relative and is unable to discern that which is relative within every absolute.[1] Judeo-Christian religion is on the wane in Western culture, thinks Niebuhr, not because men have outgrown it or have been "emancipated" from it or have found it "meaningless" through positivistic strictures, but because it has not become pragmatic enough. That is, it has not made ethical resources, which it possesses in abundance, available to society.

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[1] Cf. *Reflections on the End of an Era* (1934), pp. 287-289.

So Niebuhr can admit various kinds of social and even political "extremism" whenever the absolute obligation to love and achieve an equality of justice is thwarted by too much concern for order at the expense of freedom. But his dialectical insight enables him to perceive that the contrary situation in which the balance of justice is endangered due to social anarchies consists in a preoccupation with freedom at the expense of a much-needed political stability. In keeping with the spirit of his age, much of Niebuhr's writing in politics and ethics has been favorable toward the forces which work for social change and freedom in accordance with his political activism and pragmatism. He advocates a certain amount of idealism, fanaticism, coercion, and even use of "illusions" which may be necessary to bring into actuality the hoped-for and sorely-needed conditions of proximate justice which he envisions. But today's juncture in human affairs calls for the insights of an absolute perspective, so that any immediate social changes may be subjected to the same scrutiny which had motivated the movements that brought them into existence. And also at this point there is need of rationally-perceived principles of justice which serve to restrain fanaticism and preserve those valid basic structures of community life which continue to exist even amidst the change.

That a successful and workable ethic should be based in Christian faith is amply validated in the ethical meaning which that faith supplies and in the amount and quality of justice which society can achieve under its auspices. Faith really validates itself in practice. There is also plenty of evidence, Niebuhr believes, which justifies the Christian faith as a meaningful perspective in a highly relativistic and complicated age. The overall perspective of Christian faith is such as to allow the ethical thinker to devote himself to practical and social issues with a balanced understanding that his achievements will never meet standards of completeness, but that nevertheless what he does accomplish may be a new and higher level of approximate justice which will be fulfilled ultimately in trans-historical terms. "The final wisdom of life requires, not the annulment of incongruity but the achievement of serenity within and above it."[1] It is at this ultimate juncture in human experience that the Christian outlook and the Christian virtues fulfill man's possibilities, and that Christian doctrines serve as

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1. The Irony of American History (1952), p. 63.

"symbols" of that which is best and most useful for human communities.

In a work published in 1934, Niebuhr made a statement which amounts to something of a political and ethical credo. In this statement are contained many of the typical insights that this study has struggled to explore:

> An adequate approach to the social and moral problems must include a political policy which will bring the most effective social check upon conflicting egoistic impulses in society; a moral idealism which will exploit every available resource of altruistic impulse and reason to extend life from selfish to social ends; and a religious world-view which will do justice to the ideals of the spirit which reach beyond the possibilities of historic achievement and thereby challenge every concrete attainment with the vision of the unattained.
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> The modern world-view in its sober and prudential rationality fails to comprehend the total dimensions of human life. It does not take sufficient account either of the stubborn impulses which operate below the level of reason and express themselves particularly in those relations with which an adequate politics must deal, or with the ideals of pure love and self-sacrifice which burst the bounds of the canons of prudential morality and reveal the human spirit in its final protest against the impulses of nature. The modern view considers only what life reveals in the conventional and tame relations in which reason has checked and extended natural impulses. It fails to see the higher and lower dimensions where life is more purely nature and more purely spirit. An adequate world-view must do justice to life on all three levels. This can only be done by a radical political theory, a theory in morals which allows for both the prudence of liberalism and the disinterestedness of radical religion; and finally an idea of 'grace' as found only in classical religion.[1]

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[1] Reflections on the End of an Era, pp. 229-230.

CHAPTER III

REACTION TO RELATIVISM IN THE ETHICAL THOUGHT OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

It seems necessary to recognize the existence of certain problems of method which surround the study of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the man and his works. These are problems which cannot be treated extensively, much less solved or overcome, in the scope of this work. But they are problems which must be acknowledged as factors that could inhibit in some manner the use of Bonhoeffer's thought in exposition of a question of scholarly interest. Among others, three general problems stand out: the problem of the wartime and prison environment which undoubtedly has influenced the degree if not the content of Bonhoeffer's thinking; the problem of development in his thought, extending over periods of peacetime and war; and lastly the problem of the somewhat scattered and incomplete nature of most of his ethical writings--the Ethics and Letters.

There should be no reason to deny that the exceptional and traumatic experiences which Bonhoeffer underwent have affected his ethical thinking. His ecumenical concerns sharpened his appreciation of the wholeness and inclusiveness of the Christian gospel. His persecution by the Nazis as a minister of the gospel in the oppressed "Confessional

Church," his being forced underground as a seminary teacher, and his arrest and long imprisonment no doubt have both focused and exaggerated this thought. We see in Dietrich Bonhoeffer a man reacting honestly and intelligently to what he considered to be the ultimate reality of God and to the conditions of a world at war which gripped him so intensely. These were facets of the ever-changing, concrete life situations which demanded his decision and action. Out of his encounter with life at these levels he emerged with a conviction about the unity and wholeness of reality, because of his belief in the fundamental truth of God's power and revelation in Christ. Therefore he was very Christ-centered,[1] both in thought and in action. We are compelled to admit that his situations have greatly affected his thought, and it becomes a problem to relate his prison thinking, for instance, to what we might consider to be normal peacetime thinking. We can of course not determine, and it seems fruitless to speculate concerning, what may have been the end result with Bonhoeffer had he not had his experiences. The facts are that he did. So in using his thoughts we must be aware of this and of the need to recognize any possible effects upon our problem which his unusual experiences might untowardly produce.

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[1] The thesis of John D. Godsey in The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960) is that the "clue" to understanding Bonhoeffer's thought and development lies in appreciating his basic and consistent "Christocentrism," (cf. pp. 264-272).

The above considerations merge with the second problem, that of development. As in the treatment of this problem in the thought of Niebuhr,[1] it is asserted that there exists a basic continuity to Bonhoeffer's thought which allows the use of that thought holistically in application to the problem of concern in this study. This basic continuity is evident in his concept of wholeness, and is of interest to us in treating of the problem offered by ethical relativism. Bonhoeffer's understanding of reality is that it is a unity. This is a religious point of view which enabled him to penetrate the façade of Christian religious presuppositions and to challenge the Church with questions concerning its own foundations and its continuing validity in a world in which these presuppositions may no longer exist. And it is likewise this understanding of reality which allowed Bonhoeffer to describe the Western world as being bereft of its true form, and as heading toward a total annihilation of meaning in its rebellion against that true form, which is Christ. Though Bonhoeffer did unquestionably change and develop in his thinking, we are not on this account forced to conclude that there is nothing which remains constant within his per-

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1. See supra, chapt. II, pp. 20-24. The general statements pertaining to the problem of development in Niebuhr are applicable to the similar problems in Bonhoeffer.

spectives. Indeed, the development makes sense and is traceable intelligibly if certain assumptions of continuity and wholeness are made. At this point commentary upon the method of treating Bonhoeffer's thought merges with the general scope of the question of the relative and the absolute and its solution in contemporary ethics. Bonhoeffer's very life, as well as his thought considered holistically, comprises something of a commentary upon this question. It is a part of the purpose of this work to determine what this aspect of his thought is and how it contributes to the study of this problem for modern Christian thought.

We have chosen herein to focus upon the later works, inasmuch as it is within these that the bulk of Bonhoeffer's ethical writing has occurred. According to the point of view of scholarly preference for finalized and propositional statements, his later writings suffer from the tentativity which comes out of their incomplete nature, and because they were never published as a polished whole. The _Ethics_[1] has emerged publicly not as the completed systematic treatise which he intended it to be, but as a compilation of writings, some of which had to be salvaged from hiding places where they had been secreted in order to prevent their destruction. So the Ethics is a collection of writings, including some not completed and some which contain only suggestions and outlines of thoughts which were to come. Thus we have for inspection not the formal work which the author has finalized and is prepared to underwrite and defend, but one which at least in part must be considered as tentative, because this part is undefined or only suggested. The question then becomes one of how to treat such works and in what degree to consider them as authentic.

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[1] Ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Neville Horton Smith (The Library of Philosophy and Theology; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961). First published in the German as _Ethik_ (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1949).

In answer it must be said that in any case we are "stuck" with the works as they exist, however fragmentary or amorphous may be their condition. There is no "real" Bonhoeffer to which we can justifiably compare the extant materials in order to verify or validate them. In addition, something perhaps can be said for considering them as authentic representations of what Bonhoeffer really thought and as quotable for source material in an exposition of that thought. We can without being overly ingenuous accept the work of Bethge, the editor and compiler of Bonhoeffer's Ethics, because of his familiarity with Bonhoeffer and because of the methods which he used in making the compilation. There is no justification for doubting the seriousness with which Bonhoeffer regarded his undertakings in ethical writing, and consequently neither is there for belittling a priori the stature of what he was able to produce, even though it is in an unfinished state. Our lack of knowledge concerning the finished product as the author would have presented it is not sufficient grounds for underrating the beginnings and those portions upon which he did spend much time, and which we evidently do possess in a relative state of completion. Therefore liberty is taken herein to use the materials in the _Ethics_ upon the basis that (1) this, along with the _Letters_, is the only material available for our purpose; (2) this material is reliable as it stands, though of course not complete; and (3) the material does represent Bonhoeffer's latest and best contributions toward the subject in question.

The problem relative to the _Letters and Papers from Prison_[1] is similar in some respects but of course more serious inasmuch as the _Letters_ are just that--letters to a friend and confidant. They were not intended by the author for publication and finally were published at least partly in response to the growing demand for material which would furnish additional clues to the thought of an exciting and controversial theological thinker. Since the _Letters_ were unpublished material as far as the author himself was concerned, one may inquire as to the legitimacy of their use in support of public questions and theses such as the present study. The letters have now of course been published and have taken their place in the lists of scholastically acceptable materials. Also, it conceivably is true that thoughts which emerge in so disarming fashion as letters to a friend could be none other than representative of the deepest and truest elements of Bonhoeffer's views. In other words, the question of authenticity might well be decided, in the case of the Letters and Papers from Prison, in favor of the Letters versus hitherto published materials from which they may differ. So the policy herein is that, aside from admitting to the informal nature of the elements of Bonhoeffer's thinking which appear in the Letters, and from a corresponding hesitancy to depend upon them alone to substantiate conclusions of importance about Bonhoeffer's thought as a whole, they will be considered as valid insights into the directions his ideas were taking subsequent to the bulk of his labors upon the Ethics. It is not apparent why such procedure or use of the Letters should be considered as inappropriate, for the problems of methodology become insurmountable only if scholars are content to let them become so.

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[1] Ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962). Original publication of this book was in Germany, as _Widerstand and Ergebung--Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft_ (Munich, Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1951).

i The Reality of God

Reality and its apprehension

Bonhoeffer's ethical thought is embedded in and begins with the ultimate reality of God. This reality is not purely conceptual or ideal. It is an ontological reality; it is being; it is real, in the sense of being independent of human cognition. It is the reality of God as Creator, and as God who brings reconciliation and redemption to man and the world. All other "realities" are embedded in God, whose reality is ultimate.[1]

God is not merely a religious idea which is subject to human knowledge as an object which depends on the whims of the knower. Nor is God just the end result of highest religious experience. God is the beginning and the end of all human thought and action, which apart from the ultimate reality of God are unreal, are "abstraction," according to Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer rejects as unnecessary all attempts to document God psychologically or rationally as an inner or ideal object of knowledge.

Consequently, God is known primarily not in an idealistic or "transcendental" way, for transcendentally God's reality is not truly ultimate, in that it is dependent on the act of perceiving, even though this perception is understood as relational. And neither is a purely ontological means of knowing appropriate to ultimate reality, as known in and through the Church, theologically. For God as understood in this fashion is made to fit philosophical suppositions which are the work of human reason. And reason, while indispensable and highly serviceable for theological ethics, cannot be made to be its own criterion for validity. That is, it cannot presume to *know* that which is ultimate, since reason itself is less than ultimate and indeed is "unreal" if detached from its own source of being, which is ultimate reality itself.[1]

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[1] See Ethics, p. 55.

Therefore, ultimate reality is that which is known primarily and directly by revelation, as appropriated through faith. It is *given* to human perceptivity by God's self-witness. Faith, as it were, "deduces" God's reality, from the "fact" of God's revelation in a "real" world.[2] Ultimate reality is objective in the sense of being independent of knowing subjects and also in the sense that it is known and reckoned publically, that is, from revelation as it appears in the Bible and as it is conceived also in the thought of the Reformation.[3]

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[1] Bonhoeffer's treatment of theological knowledge is to be found most completely in *Act and Being*, trans. Bernard Noble (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1961). First published as *Akt und Sein* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1956). The details of this treatment cannot be included here, but it is clear that Bonhoeffer's ethical thought must not be separated from his doctrine of theological knowledge and revelation in general.

[2] *Ethics*, p. 61.

[3] Cf. *ibid.*, p. 63.

For Bonhoeffer, God as ultimate reality is revealed and made manifest in Jesus Christ.[1] "The reality of Christ comprises the reality of the world within itself. . . . The New Testament is concerned solely with the manner in which the reality of Christ assumes reality in the present world, which it has already encompassed, seized, and possessed."[2] Revelation is personal, being mediated through a person to which men can respond in obedience when called to be disciples.

Bonhoeffer believes that contemporary times exhibit a progressive historical "coming of age" which is the culmination of the development of increasing secularization in the West. This is a day in which the hidden is opened to scrutiny; "reality lays itself bare," and "there are once more villains and saints," rather than a theoretical homogeneity of good and evil.[3] Modern man has become independent of God, no longer needing God as a "working hypothesis"[4] for solving human problems. Man has come out openly to deny that God exists, flaunting his disbelief and being thoroughly successful at it. We are in a situation of apocalyptic significance, one in which the reality of God is being experienced by man in his most secular phase, though secular man does not realize that he knows God in his triumphant claiming of a reality which he believes to be totally independent of God. Good and evil are not indistinguishable in the apocalyptic situation. To one who is able to perceive, they are most evidently separated. They are ontologically distinguished. There are evil ones and there are good ones, and "it is worse for a liar to tell the truth than for a lover of truth to lie."[1]

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[1] Cf. ibid., p. 56.

[2] Ibid., p. 64.

[3] Ibid., p. 3.

[4] See Letters and Papers from Prison, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962), p. 194.

Ethical theorizing is completely at a loss in this age of "a superabounding reality of concrete ehtical problems."[2] Theory is interesting when an inwardness and hiddenness is preserved, but in today's world this condition no longer exists. Ethical theory does not understand that evil, which today especially is ontological rather than logical or theoretical, should not in this situation appear as good. So conceptual ethical thinking is now empty and unavailing, because it cannot grasp the real which is now laid bare with such precocious and embarrassing starkness.[3]

Therefore what is needed, and indeed all that avails for

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1. Ethics, p. 3. Bonhoeffer may well have had in mind Hitler and the National Socialists when he wrote these words. Cf. the "Memoir" by G. Leibholz in The Cost of Discipleship, trans. R. H. Fuller (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949), p. 24.

2. Ibid.

3. Cf. ibid., pp. 3-4.

man to understand today's ethical reality is "simple steadfastness in the truth of God." This means that man in his effort to be moral has to forsake his dependence on abstract theory and perceive God's reality concretely as it is revealed, in "simplicity" and "wisdom."[1] "Simplicity" is the ability to see the absolute "truth of God" amidst the relativity in which it is enfolded. "Wisdom" is the ability to recognize "the significant in the factual." The simple man, "precisely because he looks only to God, without any sidelong glance at the world, . . . is able to look at the reality of the world freely and without prejudice." This is also wisdom, for "the wise man is the one who sees reality as it is, and who sees into the depths of things." Understanding this reality is "to perceive the essential nature of things."[2] This simplicity and wisdom stand aside from abstract reasoning, from a preoccupation with factual information and ethical striving.

All of this means that man who would wish to perceive and understand reality must come to understand reality as united. There can be no proper apprehension of God or of the world as long as they are regarded as separate. For God has accomplished through Christ the reconciliation of the world to himself, and now one must understand God not as separate from the world but as totally united with it. God and

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1. See *ibid.*, pp. 4, 7.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

the world are one reality. "Whoever sees Jesus Christ does indeed see God and the world in one. He can henceforward no longer see God without the world or the world without God."[1] It requires reiteration that the unity of God and the world is not an "ideal" unity which human knowledge abstracts. It is a unity which is "real," in the sense of being objective and independent of reason, but which reason nevertheless can (with the help of revelation) detect and appreciate.

The point of departure for Christian ethics, then, is the reality of God as revealed in Christ. Bonhoeffer seems to belie his own insight at this point by stating that "it is fair to begin by demanding assent to this proposition of anyone who wishes to concern himself with the problem of a Christian ethic."[2] This seems to be an immediate denial of what he purports to maintain, that is, that God's reality is not propositional but "real." And yet Bonhoeffer's insistence is not without defense, for he is not attempting to show that the propositional and the conceptual or "ideal" is necessarily unreal, but rather that properly understood it too is a part of God's reality. One must begin at some point in the realm of rational exposition if one is to discuss intelligently beyond a system of grunts, snorts, or wheezes, and the primary assumption upon which all Christian ethical theory is based, in the claim which Bonhoeffer makes here, is reality itself. Thought presupposes reality; reality cannot be escaped by shunting ontological considerations into the background. This is the crux or "linchpin"[1] which _unites_ the ideal and the real, which ties rationality to what is experienced. This fundamental proposition, he insists,

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[1] Ibid., p. 8.

[2] Ibid., p. 56.

> poses the ultimate and crucial question of the reality which we mean to reckon with in our lives. . . . No man can decide this question by himself, by his own choice, without deciding it wrongly, for it presupposes the answer given, namely that, whatever our decision may be, God has already spoken His word of revelation, and even in the false reality we cannot live otherwise than through the true reality of the word of God.[2]

So Christian ethics can begin with a proposition which is true because it is based on reality itself, and can concern itself with the central problem proper to its own essential nature, namely the problem of "the realization among God's creatures of the revelational reality of God in Christ."[3]

Reality and unity

(1) The disunity of the West

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[1] Cf. Bonhoeffer's use of "linchpin" in _Letters and Papers from Prison_, p. 163. Here he is speaking of the structural "linchpin" as having been removed from Christianity, not that he accepts this situation as real, but uses it descriptively for the factual nature of contemporary Western society.

[2] _Ethics_, pp. 56-57.

[3] _Ibid._, p. 57.

Bonhoeffer delimits his ethical situation according to the boundaries of the Western world. He excludes the Oriental and African cultures not by arbitrary choice, but because of the "mysterious fact" of the self-containedness of the Western world and "the fact that the form of Christ is the unity of the western nations." He insists, however, that this choosing of a particular type of human culture for discussion in no wise fragments humanity, and that what Christian ethics says about "man" it says about all men, of whatever culture. It is therefore the criterion of concreteness which forces us to consider our own culture rather than some other, especially in light of the fact that "until our own days its consciously affirmed and recognized underlying basis has been the form of Christ," and in consideration that ours is "a section of human history which He himself has chosen."[1]

It is only in the Western world, says Bonhoeffer, that historical inheritance and progression have significance, and this is due to the reality that Western thought "is consciously or unconsciously governed by the entry of God into history at a definite place and a definite point of time, that is to say, by the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ."[2] The form of Christ has taken form in the Western world,

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1. See ibid., pp. 23-24.

2. Ibid., p. 26.

giving it its own peculiar shape, continuity, and unity.

But the unfortunate circumstance of the contemporary Western world is that it has "lost" the form of Christ which formerly it possessed. This means that the West has correspondingly lost its own shape, continuity, and unity. Bonhoeffer finds evidence for this fact of Western disunity in the way in which the Western nations now wage a kind of "total war" against each other, whereas prior to the loss of the form of Christ the nations were content to appeal to the "arbitration of God" rather than to use any means whatever to achieve victory as they do today.[1]

Bonhoeffer describes the progressive "coming of age" of the Western world as having taken place in "enlightened" man's revolt against the Catholic Church in a secular thrust based on science and technology. But this could happen only because the Reformation had previously dissolved the unity of the world and the _corpus christi_ which had existed in an historical order, that is, the _corpus christianum_ as administered by the visible Church. The Reformation did not intend what resulted, which was that the "world" pursued worldly values through the successful means of science and technology as ends in themselves. Whereas the Reformation intended to establish that man is holy only by God's mercy and not in "sacred" or "profane" realms as such, Western man used his emancipation from churchly control for humanistic purposes, those of human rights, democracy, and nationalism.[1] Liberated human reason has achieved great things, among these the guarantee that all subsequent dignified ethical thinking must be imbued with intellectual honesty.[2] But left to its own devices it has created the culture-destroying phenomena of technology, mass movements and nationalism. Bonhoeffer points to what he believes to be "an underlying law of history, namely that the demand for absolute liberty brings men to the depths of slavery," and this brings about war, self-destruction, and eventually, nihilism.[3]

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[1] See _ibid_., pp. 29-30.

Nihilism, or the "void" (das Nichts), is the end result of Western secularism which has lost its true form. Secularism or "godlessness" is the only form which holds the West together today. But Bonhoeffer believes that today (he is thinking in terms of the "today" of World War II) we are experiencing an eschatological crisis of the unity which Western godlessness brings. The crisis is nihilism, which "is itself a religion, a religion of hostility to God."[4]

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1. See ibid., pp. 27-35.
2. See ibid., p. 34.
3. See ibid., p. 38.
4. Ibid., p. 38. Cf. p. 41.

"The deification of man is the proclamation of nihilism."[1] Nihilism is not a total actuality, but it is a threat, for Western society stands on the brink of the void. Bonhoeffer provides a vivid description of the conditions of relativism and nihilism which he believes pervade today's culture.

> The void towards which the west is drifting is not the natural end, the dying away and decline of a once flourishing history of nations. It is, once again, a specifically western void, a rebellious and outrageous void, and one which is the enemy of both God and man. As an apostasy from all that is established it is the supreme manifestation of all the powers which are opposed to God. It is the void made god. No one knows its goal or its measure. Its dominion is absolute. It is a creative void, which blows its anti-god's breath into the nostrils of all that is established and awakens it to a false semblance of new life while sucking out from it its proper essence, until at last it falls in ruin as a lifeless husk and is cast away. The void engulfs life, history, family, nation, language, faith. The list can be prolonged indefinitely, for the void spares nothing.
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> In the face of the peril of the void there is no longer any meaning in the question of the historical inheritance which requires of those who receive it that they shall both develop it in the present and hand it on to the future. There is no future and there is no past. There is only the moment which has been rescued from the void, and the desire to snatch from the void the next moment as well. Already what belongs to yesterday is consigned to oblivion, and the affairs of tomorrow are still too far off to impose any obligation today. The burden of yesterday is shaken off by glorifying the misty past, and tomorrow's task is evaded by speaking rather of the coming millennium.[2]

> The absence of anything lasting means the collapse of the foundation of historical life, confidence, in all

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[1] Ibid., p. 39.

[2] Ibid., p. 42

> its forms. Since there is no confidence in truth, the place of truth is usurped by sophistic propaganda. Since there is no confidence in justice, whatever is useful is declared to be just. And even the tacit confidence in one's fellow-man, which rests on the certainty of permanence and constancy, is now superseded by suspicion and an hour-to-hour watch on one's neighbour. If we ask what remains, there can be only one answer: fear of the void. The most astonishing observation we can make today is that in the face of the void one is prepared to sacrifice anything and everything: one's own judgment, one's human character, and one's neighbour. If this fear is unscrupulously exploited, there is no limit to what can be achieved.[1]

So we live in a situation in which there is "no ground beneath our feet," in which "every conceivable alternative seems equally intolerable."[2] Rationalism, moral fanaticism, conscience, duty, freedom--all alike are to be rejected because they do not meet man's need in today's world. This is both because of the radical nature of the void and because these ethical techniques are all estranged from reality.[3] Bonhoeffer says that there are only two things remaining which have the power to avert mankind's rush toward the void of nihilism. These are "the miracle of a new awakening of faith," and "the force of order . . . which effectively blocks the way of those who are about to plunge into the abyss."[4] Both are the work of God, the former intervening

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1. _Ibid._, pp. 43-44. While allowing for the extremity of Bonhoeffer's wartime situation, these words still stir murmurs of assent as descriptions of modern ethical confusion.

2. _Letters and Papers from Prison_, p. 16.

3. Cf. _ibid._, pp. 17-19 and _Ethics_, pp. 4-6.

4. _Ethics_, p. 44.

in history "from above" and the latter taking effect "within history" as God's governance. The former is effected by God alone, but is proclaimed through the Church. The latter is effected by men according to God's decision, through the physical power of the state.[1]

(2) Reunion in the form of Christ

What must take place if a total collapse into the void is to be avoided in contemporary Western culture, thinks Bonhoeffer, is a movement toward reunity. And this movement must be accomplished by a resumption of the form of Christ, which is the reality of God and therefore the true form of Western unity. Here there is a continuity of the historical progression of the West. The true form and the continuity have been lost through human rejection of Christ and the Church, and Western culture is at the point of breaking up completely because it has chosen a false form, secularism, as its temporary means of unity.

It is the Church which carries the weight of the possibility of a positive thrust toward Western reunion. The state exercises what is primarily a negative function, that of restraining men in their movement toward the void. But the Church, "in devoting herself to her proper task, . . .

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[1] See ibid., p. 44.

preaching the risen Jesus Christ, . . . strikes a mortal blow at the spirit of destruction."[1] The message of the Church must be central, at the heart of Western culture, if it is to be effective. And the positive way in which the Church proclaims the gospel of redemption and reunion is through suffering, in the assumption of guilt for the disunity into which the world has fallen.[2] For the Church is the corpus christi, which is "the true unity of the western world."[3]

The Church must confess that it is guilty of deficiency in proclaiming its message, in resisting apostasy and injustice, in maintaining a structured society, in giving advice and assistance for social and individual problems. In short, the Church has failed to give witness to "the truth of God," and now it must begin its message of renewal with self-confession and assumption of guilt for its own sins and also for the sins of the whole world. The Church is "sentenced" to bear the sins of humanity, and in bearing these sins to give testimony that the sins are judged. The individual and the Church partake of the form of Christ in confession and sentencing; this is justification.[4]

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[1] Ibid., p. 45.

[2] See ibid.

[3] Ibid., p. 32.

[4] Ibid., pp. 49-51.

> The justification of the western world, which has fallen away from Christ, lies solely in the divine justification of the Church, which leads her to the full confession of guilt and to the form of the cross. The renewal of the western world lies solely in the divine renewal of the Church, which leads her to the fellowship of the risen and living Jesus Christ.[1]

With these words, Bonhoeffer indicates that the Western world is justified and renewed only "indirectly, through the faith of the Church." "For the nations there is only a healing of the wound, a cicatrization of guilt, in the return to order, to justice, to peace, and to the granting of free passage to the Church's proclamation of Jesus Christ. Thus the nations bear the inheritance of their guilt."[2] The Church and the individual Christian operate with complete forgiveness of sins, but the world participates in justification only through a gradual historical process of healing.[3] The Western world can be completely justified and renewed, then, only when there is an actual historical achievement of justice, order, and peace.[4]

The distinction between Church and world for purposes of understanding the accomplishment of justification must be interpreted as a separation of the Church from the world.

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[1] *Ibid*., p. 52.

[2] *Ibid*.

[3] See *ibid*., p. 53.

[4] See *ibid*., p. 54.

Bonhoeffer repeatedly insists that this is erroneous, abstract, and unreal thinking, because the Church and the world are bound up together in the one reality which is God's. So the Church participates in the slow historical cleansing process also. The relation of Church and world must be discussed more thoroughly in a subsequent section.

(3) The real man

The true form of mankind is Christ. Bonhoeffer considers mankind as a real unity in form, that is, the form of Christ is the form also of all individual men. The form of Christ "overcomes" the world, so that men are "drawn in into the form of Jesus Christ." This is what it means to be in the "image" of God, that man is conformed "with the unique form of Him who was made man, was crucified, and rose again."[1] This is also a transformation of man into the image of Christ.

Man becomes "real" inasmuch as he is conformed with the incarnate Christ. This means "to have the right to be the man one really is," beyond hypocrisy and the compulsion to make something of oneself other than what one really is, for "God loves the real man."[2] The real man is likewise conformed to the form of Christ in that he suffers under the crucifixion and sentencing of God, realizing his own sin and surrendering to God's judgment in this realization. It is only thus that man becomes just in God's sight. And to be conformed to the form of Christ means to participate in the resurrection of Christ, not only in some future abode but right in the midst of contemporary living. This is being a "new man," one who "lives in the world like any other man. Often there is little to distinguish him from the rest."[1]

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[1] Ibid., p. 18.

[2] See ibid., pp. 18-19.

Bonhoeffer insists that Christ takes form "'among us', 'now' and 'here'." This is because of the nature of God's reality, because reality is fundamentally unity, and because the concrete reality of this present world _is_ God's reality, the reality which in assuming the form of Christ is taking on its own rightful form.[2] In taking the form of Christ, men take on their true manhood and the world conforms to its true origin, essence, and goal. This is essentially the conception of true reality which is conveyed in the Lutheran understanding of the Lord's Supper, wherein the "real presence" pervades the elements in "hidden" form. This notion of reality has tremendous consequences for Christian ethics, and Bonhoeffer's whole ethical contribution can

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1. _Ibid_., p. 19.

2. Cf. _ibid_., p. 22.

be understood as an attempt to communicate his conviction that the Christian man must live as a "real man," in community with other real men. "The real man can live before God, and we can allow the real man to live before God side by side with ourselves without either despising or deifying him."[1] Ethics is to be understood as "formation,"

> the bold endeavour to speak about the way in which the form of Jesus Christ takes form in our world, in a manner which is neither abstract nor casuistic, neither programmatic nor purely speculative. Concrete judgments and decisions will have to be ventured here. Decision and action can here no longer be delegated to the personal conscience of the individual. Here there are concrete commandments and instructions for which obedience is demanded.[2]

The first "place" in which Christ takes form in the world is in His Church. The Church is the body of Christ, rather than "a religious community of worshippers." For in Christ the form of mankind has been "re-created." Bonhoeffer regards as "a mystery, for which there is no explanation," the fact that not all of mankind recognizes and realizes the form of Christ as its true form.[3] But since this is true, it is all the more necessary and pertinent that the Church be regarded as the "place" within the world wherein the form of Christ is realized, and also as the "place" wherein "Jesus Christ's taking form is proclaimed and accomplished. It is this proclamation and this event that Christian ethics is designed to serve."[1]

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[1] Ibid., p. 12.

[2] Ibid., p. 25.

[3] See ibid., pp. 20-21.

(4) Religionlessness

There are two kinds of "religion" which Bonhoeffer recognizes and rejects as being not consonant with reality. One of these is the secularized, anti-church godlessness which centers in the deification of man and an "unrestrained vitalism" which carries man toward his own self-destruction. This is a false religion of nihilism which states its opposition to Christ positively.[2] But he recognizes that there is an essential element of reality in some kinds of "godlessness."

> There is . . . a godlessness which is full of promise, a godlessness which speaks against religion and against the Church. It is the protest against pious godlessness in so far as this has corrupted the Churches, and thus in a certain sense, if only negatively, it defends the heritage of a genuine faith in God and of a genuine Church.[3]

The other "religion" is then a kind of "pious godlessness," which is repudiated by the "godlessness" which is full of promise, and in the repudiation a healthy and hopeful thing is accomplished.[4] In several of his letters from prison Bonhoeffer developed the theme that "religion" is passé in the Western world, a world which has become adult and independent of God as the solver of its problems. Even the so-called "ultimate questions" of human inwardness which have been used by Christian "religion" to prove to the grown-up world that it cannot get along without God, have ceased to have any real impact on society. Bonhoeffer castigates this religious technique for its being inappropriate in today's reality:

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[1] Ibid., p. 25.

[2] See ibid., p. 39.

[3] Ibid., pp. 39-40.

[4] Ibid.

> The attack by Christian apologetic upon the adulthood of the world I consider to be in the first place pointless, in the second ignoble, and in the third un-Christian. Pointless, because it looks to me like an attempt to put a grown-up man back into adolescence, i. e. to make him dependent on things on which he is not in fact dependent any more, thrusting him back into the midst of problems which are in fact not problems for him any more. Ignoble, because this amounts to an effort to exploit the weakness of man for purposes alien to him and not freely subscribed to by him. Un-Christian, because for Christ himself is being substituted one particular stage in the religiousness of man, i.e. a human law.[1]

This Christian "religion" is no longer respectable or defensible in Bonhoeffer's eyes. "Religious" action is always partial, for it is done in conscious contradistinction from the world. It is unreal because it does not involve the whole of life.[2] "Religion" uses God as a Deus ex machina which the religious "call to their aid, either for

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1. Letters and Papers from Prison, pp. 196-197.

2. See ibid., pp. 223-224.

the so-called solving of insoluble problems or as support in human failure--always, that is to say, helping out human weakness or on the borders of human existence."[1] Eventually, in this procedure, God becomes superfluous, a kind of "stop-gap"[2] to fill up the incompleteness of human knowledge and account for the things which mystify us for the moment. "Religious" thinking is a kind of inwardness, that which is "metaphysically" or "individualistically" separate from the one reality of God.[3] It is that which relegates God to man's inner feelings and thoughts, to human conscience.[4] It is this which Bonhoeffer reacts against with greatest indignation. He finds in his own experience that he responds more spontaneously to "nonreligious" people than to the "religious." He develops a conviction that the Christian must approach the New Testament and themes of salvation from an Old Testament point of view, which involves a "suspicion and horror of religiosity" and an indisposition to pronounce the name of God or to speak openly of him.[5]

Bonhoeffer's great sensitivity and respect for the hidden realities and mysteries come into consideration at this point.

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 165.

[2] See *ibid.*, p. 190.

[3] See *ibid.*, p. 167.

[4] See *ibid.*, p. 162.

[5] See *ibid.*, pp. 95-96.

"A secret discipline must be re-established whereby the mysteries of the Christian faith are preserved from profanation."[1] Bonhoeffer's God is mysterious, yet he is not far removed but rather is in the center of things. We positively know of his presence and his activity, within and under our normal, secular existence. At several points in his letters Bonhoeffer mentions with obvious wryness that his fellow prisoners are too unabashed in their readiness to display and parade what properly should be concealed, especially their cynicism, terror, and eagerness to tell secrets. But his cultured sensitivity is only one aspect of this philosophical conviction that God is too great to be grasped and displayed by "religious" acts and ceremonies. The "inwardness" and "conscience" which he criticizes as evidence of "religiosity" are objectionable to the "nonreligious" man only when they become too objectively evident or audaciously displayed. Bonhoeffer's own animosity toward "inwardness" and "individualism" shows up mainly in connection with his aversion to the use of psychotherapy and existential philosophy as a kind of "secularized methodism" and "religious blackmail" by which to convince the happy "nonreligious" man how unhappy and thus in need of God he should be.[2]

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1. Ibid., p. 168.

2. See ibid., pp. 196, 212. Cf. Ethics, p. 82.

Consonant with these themes, Bonhoeffer set himself to the task of reinterpreting Christianity and the Church and of redefining theological language. He was not able to finish this undertaking, but has given us some hints and basic ideas concerning the direction in which his thought was leading him. The point at which he wished to begin his "nonreligious" interpretation of Christianity is with a clear-sighted emphasis on "intellectual sincerity" or "ultimate honesty." And the point of honesty vis-à-vis God is that "God is teaching us that we must live as men who can get along very well without him." But this is only better to establish the true relation to God, for "before God and with him we live without God. God allows himself to be edged out of the world and on to the Cross. God is weak and powerless in the world, and that is exactly the way, the only way, in which he can be with us and help us."[1] It is thus that the aforementioned promising kind of godlessness bears fruit, for "the process we have described by which the world came of age was an abandonment of a false conception of God, and a clearing of the decks for the God of the Bible, who conquers power and space in the world by his weakness."[2] Bonhoeffer believed that "the God of the Bible" is like this, and he used occasional biblical references to support his contention, although his

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1. Ibid., pp. 219-220.

2. Ibid., p. 220.

intended documentation for this in Scripture was apparently never consummated.[1]

God is to be understood in man's encounter with Jesus Christ, as a being for others. And Christian life, the life of faith, is "a new life for others, through participation in the Being of God."[2] The Christian responds to the call of Christ in a discipleship of obedience, which means that he lives a life of responsibility for others.

ii Unity and Distinction

Bonhoeffer's conception of reality is that it belongs to God and that it is fundamentally a unity. For ethics, this means that whatever conceptual considerations are entertained it will be mistaken to believe that there is ever a separation between the "substance" of our thinking and the extramental reality which is basically at one with the mental. As indicated in the previous section, this notion of unity is rational, for human knowledge is gained by abstracting from the particular sensory "material" which is made available to the mind. Knowledge consists of both generalization and distinction, and the two modes of thought are interconnected. So it will be an inescapable thing for any thinker in ethics to draw distinctions and see differences as well as to perform mental acts of unification. Bonhoeffer realizes this, and at several points in his writings he indulges in an open drawing of distinctions within the very "reality" which he simultaneously asserts to be indivisible. So the picture which we consider in our attempts to understand Bonhoeffer's ethical thought is of a man who interprets reality as an undivided unity, but who nevertheless in his own thinking actively draws distinctions within that reality. The Medieval question of the ontological status of the universal is still relevant here, and for Bonhoeffer it seems appropriate to observe that he considers that the universal (which for him is nothing other, apparently, than the conceptual object of thought itself) is _distinct but not separate_ from the basic unified reality which God guarantees.

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[1] Cf. ibid., p. 206, a letter wherein he remarks to Bethge, "I must now collect some evidence from the New Testament to support my contentions, in the hope of sending it on later."

[2] Ibid., p. 238. This is from Bonhoeffer's projected "Outline for a Book." That this theme is also explicated in his Ethics will be indicated more fully in sec. iii.

The ideal and the real

For Bonhoeffer, all human thinking is relative to the ultimate reality of God. This means that in ethics, though it is permissible and indeed unavoidable that one think in "ideal" categories distinguished from the physical "real," one must not become preoccupied with theory at the expense of its practical applications to "concrete" realities. Much of Bonhoeffer's writing is geared to the need to emphasize the unity of reality, and he finds it necessary repeatedly to repudiate the "ideal" and the "abstract." But let us note again, and carefully, that the mistake which Bonhoeffer is castigating is not that of "idealism" per se, but rather the *separation* of the contents of one's "idealism" from their material referents. In order to point out the mistake of such mental and "unreal" separation, it is necessary to emphasize the reality of the non-mental, and repeatedly to assert the unity of the non-mental with the mental.

The relation of the Church to the world is a case in point. The Church is defined as "that community of human beings which has been led by the grace of Christ to the recognition of guilt towards Christ."[1] All individuals of the Church "are united in the collective personality of the Church," though it is sufficient for each individual that he be aware of his own guilt without having to establish that each one should feel it with him.[1] But there is a unity of the true form of mankind which guarantees that the Church is not to be isolated or separated from the rest of the individuals of mankind.

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[1] *Ethics*, pp. 46-47. The nature of the social reality of the Church was explored in *Sanctorum Communio* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1960), Bonhoeffer's doctoral dissertation. This is now available in English as *The Communion of Saints: A Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church*, trans. William Collins Sons and Co. Ltd., London (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1963). On pp. 50-51 of this work, Bonhoeffer says: "The question remains whether, besides the individual, there is not an individual collective person in which the individual participates, which goes beyond the individual but is incomprehensible without the correlate of individual personal being. The question is the metaphyical possibility of such an assumption, the idea of equilibrium or of the monadic image in sociality. With the concrete application we shall deal later. In my empirical consciousness I myself represent the community, and I do not hypostatise the community in this way: my consciousness does not wish to ascribe to the community any being outside myself. But this empirical view must be

> The concept of formation acquires its significance, indirectly, for all mankind only if what takes place in the Church does in truth take place for all men. But this again does not mean that the Church is set up, so to speak, as a model for the world. One can speak of formation and of world only if mankind is called by name in its true form, which is its own by right, which it has already received, but which it merely fails to

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> overcome. Social unity is experienced as a centre of acts from which the social unity operates. It is self-conscious, and has a will of its own, though only in the form of its members. To conclude from this that the collective person is impossible is a typically empirical objection. A community is a concrete unity. Its members must not be thought of as individual: the centre of action does not lie in each member, but in all together. This unity is the starting-point for our thought, for one does not reach the one from the many, and an individualist starting-point precludes understanding of the situation. It is not that many persons, coming together, add up to a collective person, but the person arises only through being embedded in sociality. And when this happens, simultaneously the collective person arises, not before, yet not as a consequence of the arising of the individual persons exist. But since the collective person as a centre of acts is possible only as a concrete purposive community, it can only be possible where the individual person is a real part of the concrete community.

[1] See *ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

> understand and accept, namely, the form of Jesus Christ, which is proper to man, and if in this way, in anticipation as one might say, mankind is drawn into the Church.[1]

So the true unity of mankind, and indeed of reality itself, lies in the Church which is also the body of Christ. It is true that there are two "realms" or "spheres" (church and world) which men distinguish. But these are really to be understood as parts of one fundamental unity, because "the Lord of both kingdoms is the God who is made manifest in Jesus Christ."[2]

Bonhoeffer repudiates the kind of "spherical" thinking which separates the "ideal" from the "real" and sets them in irreconcilable opposition. He cites as examples of such erroneous thinking certain concepts of the Church which make of it "one divine, holy, supernatural and Christian" kingdom as opposed to the "worldly, profane, natural and un-Christian" sphere. Some of these concepts are those held by "pseudo-Protestant thought of the period after the Reformation," the "pseudo-Lutheran scheme," "the congregation of the Elect" and the "enthusiasts."[3] The trouble with such anti-worldly schemes, thinks Bonhoeffer, is that they divide God's unified reality up into parts each of which preserves its partiality

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1. _Ibid_., pp. 21-22.

2. _Ibid_., pp. 31-32.

3. See _ibid_., pp. 62-63. "Spheres" is translated by Smith from _Räume_.

by being in opposition to the other parts. Or else one part withdraws from the other part and thus prevents God's reconciliation from being consummated. Spherical thinking presents man with a dilemma which offers him two essentially "unreal" choices, that of becoming wholly a part of one or the other of the "spheres," or that of trying to be a part of both at once and thus being at conflict within himself.[1]

So the polar concepts by which human thought draws distinctions within the world of its view are not to be regarded as "ultimate static antitheses, serving to designate mutually exclusive entities." The epistemological polarities are unified in the reality of God. This means that both the "ideal" and the "real" are equally real in the reality which is God's.[2] In fact, it is the epistomeological distinctness and opposition which comprise and preserve the ontological unity of reality, for "unity is seen in the way in which the secular and the Christian elements prevent one another from assuming any kind of static independence in their mutual relations."[3] So unity is relational, while conceptual disparity is merely an aspect of reality as it appears to our minds. Bonhoeffer stresses the essential "unreality" of the

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1. See ibid., p. 63.
2. Ibid., p. 64.
3. Ibid., p. 65.

"ideal," but perhaps for that reason it is important to note again that for his thinking it is not the ideal itself which is unreal, but rather it is the erroneous attitude which regards the ideal as separate from the rest of the real.[1]

It is necessary also to show that for Bonhoeffer unity does not mean identity. Unity is relational.

> What is Christian is not identical with what is of the world. The natural is not identical with the supernatural or the revelational with the rational. But between the two there is in each case a unity which derives solely from the reality of Christ, that is to say solely from faith in this ultimate reality.[2]

Faith establishes a relationship and re-establishes a form which is not discernible to the "eyes" of reason or of empirical investigation.

"Ethical thinking in terms of spheres, then, is invalidated by faith in the revelation of the ultimate reality in Jesus Christ, and this means that there is no real possibility of being a Christian outside the reality of the world and that there is no real worldly existence outside the reality of Jesus Christ."[3] In the case of the Church, it is obvious and admissible that the Church does occupy space in the world. But Bonhoeffer makes it clear that the space which the Church occupies is to be conceived as small, and that even this small space is necessary only so that "the reign of Jesus Christ over the whole world is evidenced and proclaimed."[1] The sole purpose of a visible, distinct, churchly "space" is that there should be a "place" within the world itself from which the "testimony is given to the foundation of all reality in Jesus Christ."[2] And concerning the secular "sphere," Bonhoeffer points out that even the "kingdom of the devil" is beneath the feet of Christ and serves Christ against its will, so that "the world is not divided between Christ and the devil, but, whether it recognizes it or not, it is solely and entirely the world of Christ."[3] So from either point of view, to regard that point of view as being separate and not only distinct is to be out of accord with God's reality and to think "abstractly."

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[1] In The Communion of Saints, p. 65, Bonhoeffer had demonstrated the reality of "objective spirit" and shown that "Idealist philosophy" is inadequate in that it has a "basic lack of concrete concept of the person," which tends to disrupt and bifurcate its understanding of reality. See p. 138 also.

[2] Ethics, p. 65.

[3] Ibid., p. 66.

The abstract and the concrete

Any thinking which bifurcates reality or which regards only one part of reality as being more real or truly real is labeled by Bonhoeffer as "abstraction." It is abstraction in the sense of being a purely human type of thinking,

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1. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

thinking born of the rejection of Christ and thus born of "self-will," or arbitrariness. It is thinking untouched by the restorative, unifying embrace of faith, and so it stands isolated from its own proper mode of understanding.

Among types of thinking which Bonhoeffer considers as "abstraction" are included "idealism," "religious" inwardness, "spherical" thinking and other kinds of epistemological or metaphysical dualism. Much of ethical thought can also be classified as abstraction in this sense, that kind which attempts to separate rationally the "good" from the "evil" and the "right" from the "wrong." For Bonhoeffer good and evil are ontologically distinct. There is a "real" difference to be drawn between them, but this is not due to human ability to discriminate arbitrarily, but rather it is due to man's position relative to Christ. Thinking ethically in terms of laws or principles as absolute bases for deriving all human action is abstraction. In fact, all thinking in terms of humanly-derived or contrived absolutes (whether in terms of "reason," "equality," "liberty," or some other value) is abstract thinking, according to Bonhoeffer's interpretation of reality. The bifurcation of man is also abstraction, for it attempts to divide man into parts, when in reality man is a whole and always to be considered as a whole, insists Bonhoeffer.[1] Even memory is a relative abstraction, for "knowledge and experience, which are realized only in retrospect, are mere abstractions compared with the life we have actually lived."[1]

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[1] See ibid., p. 59.

The corrective for abstraction is not to be found in thought itself, for thought qua thought is by nature abstract. It is to be found in the actual, in activity which involves both thought and behavior in the concrete situation. Bonhoeffer emphasizes the notion of concreteness at nearly every point in his ethical writings, for it is very basic to his conception of reality. It is at the point or the situation of concrete living that the real is "realized." The concrete is not to be abstracted from the ideal or from any other category of thought, for it is the whole man, including his thought processes, which exists concretely. The fact that the form of Christ takes form in the world is understood concretely in terms of "among us," "now," and "here." This is "the region of our decisions and encounters."

> This region undoubtedly varies very greatly in extent according to the individual, and it might consequently be supposed that these definitions could in the end be interpreted so widely and vaguely as to make room for unrestrained individualism. What prevents this is the fact that by our history we are set objectively in a definite nexus of experiences, responsibilities and decisions from which we cannot free ourselves again except by an abstraction. We live, in fact, within this nexus, whether or not we are in every respect aware of it.[2]

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[1] Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 15.

[2] Ibid., p. 24.

The concrete is a situation which is limited and concentrated and unique in itself. It is a situation into which no general principles may be fitted as absolute moulds. It is a "space" in which the full unity of God's reality can be recognized, realized, and lived out in obedience. It is the existence of the individual, not the individual in isolated individualism, but in relation to this fellows.

The penultimate and the ultimate

The one, whole reality of God is made intelligible by another major distinction in reference to time, which Bonhoeffer calls the distinction between the "penultimate" and the "ultimate" (*die letzten und die vorletzten Dinge*). It is true of these parts of reality also that they are interdependent and never to be considered as separated or in irreconcilable opposition, for they are fundamentally united in the basic, single reality. They are associated with the word of God as it comes to man in his situation, making his living intelligible and meaningful.

The penultimate is associated with God's next to last word, which is a word of "repentance." The penultimate is never intelligible by itself; it cannot stand alone. "When we speak of the things before the last, we must not speak of them as having any value of their own, but we must bring to light their relation to the ultimate."[1] The penultimate is in this world, the concrete, the here and the now. It is that part of reality in which God need not be explicitly mentioned and faith is not prated over or openly claimed. Bonhoeffer sees in consideration of the penultimate a question which "embraces the whole domain of Christian social life, and especially the whole range of Christian pastoral activity."[2] This is a question of how to live in the penultimate, which is an unavoidable necessity. Two solutions which Bonhoeffer finds unsatisfactory are the "radical," and the "compromise" solutions. The "radical" method solves the problem, which is really a question of the relation between penultimate and ultimate, by means of abstracting in favor of the ultimate. This means an interpretation of Christ always in terms of the end times and a flat rejection of the present world as a world of sin from which one should withdraw. The "compromise" solution solves the problem by abstracting in favor of the penultimate, making the penultimate to be a world autonomous in its own right, to be considered per se because the ultimate is not yet. Both of these solutions are "extreme," because they place penultimate and ultimate in a relationship of mutual exclusion. Their unsatisfactory

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1. Ibid., p. 84.

2. Ibid., p. 85.

nature is due to the fact that they contain partial truth and partial untruth. Bonhoeffer will not accept this kind of abstract or static approach to reality.[1]

The ultimate is associated with the "last word" of God, which is a word of "justification." Justification is final in a qualitative sense, inasmuch as its "contents", judgment, condemnation, and mercy, are beyond anything which man can contribute by any manner or means. It comes only by grace, through faith.[2] And it is final according to time, for it presupposes a penultimate situation in which there is accusation. The ultimate "entirely annuls and invalidates" the penultimate, but it never destroys it! The ultimate makes God's grace of supreme worth, for it remains grace and never can become works.[3] And yet the works, a part of the penultimate word and response to it, are a necessary part of reality, because they contribute to the reality of the ultimate, and indirectly help to make it what it is. There could be no "last" word without a "next to last" word. This is the kind of distinction which human thinking validly draws.

The distinction between penultimate and ultimate is not "real" in the sense of two exclusive realms. The Christian thinker must come to understand in faith that the distinctions

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1. See *ibid*., pp. 85-89.
2. *Ibid*., pp. 81-82.
3. Cf. *ibid*., pp. 79-84.

which thinking perceives in God's reality are native to thought itself, but that the reconciliation which God has wrought overcomes all separations. Any ethical conflict arising because of concentration on a "compromise" ethic based on the Incarnation or on a "radical" ethic based on either Cross or Resurrection can be resolved by accepting in faith the fundamental unity of penultimate and ultimate.[1] An appropriate explication of Bonhoeffer's basic thought at this point, and indeed of his perspective of reality as a whole is found in the following words:

> Jesus concerns himself hardly at all with the solution of worldly problems. When He is asked to do so His answer is remarkably evasive (Matt. 22.15ff.; Luke 12.13). Indeed He scarcely ever replies to men's questions directly, but answers rather from a quite different plane. His word is not an answer to human questions and problems; it is the answer of God to the question of God to man. His word is essentially determined not from below but from above. It is not a solution, but a redemption. His word has its origin not in the disunion of the human problems of good and evil, but in the perfect unity of the Son with the will of the Father. It lies beyond all human problems. That is what must first of all be understood.[2]

The penultimate is in a definite relation to the ultimate. "It is a penultimate."[3] It is proper to draw a distinction between the two "words" of God because "to give bread to the hungry man is not the same as to proclaim the grace of God and justification to him, and to have received bread is not the same as to have faith."[1] But such active good works must be done in obedience to the call of Christ and the command of God. This kind of good work is penultimate in relation to ultimate, and thoroughly necessary for Christian living. It is a part of what Bonhoeffer calls "the preparation of the way for Christ."[2] Since God's penultimate word is "repentance," which means "a concrete turning back," this-worldly, physical action is required of the Christian. And by keeping the penultimate always in the perspective of and in relation to the ultimate, the essential spiritual reality of Christ's coming is preserved.[3] It is important to remember that man does not annihilate the penultimate, but that it is Christ who does this.[4]

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[1] See *ibid.*, p. 89.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 319.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 95.

In a posthumously published letter, Bonhoeffer displays his personal sensitivity to this whole matter of divine-human relationship by his words of reticence, as concerning the revealing of what is hidden (as aforementioned) and also concerning speaking directly about things ultimate:

> My thoughts and feelings seem to be getting more and more like the Old Testament, and no wonder, I have been reading it much more than the New for the last few

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[1] *Ibid*.

[2] *Ibid*., p. 96.

[3] See *ibid*., pp. 96-97.

[4] See *ibid*., p. 98.

> months. It is only when one knows the ineffability of the Name of God that one can utter the name of Jesus Christ. It is only when one loves life and the world so much that without them everything would be gone, that one can believe in the resurrection and a new world. It is only when one submits to the law that one can speak of grace, and only when one sees the anger and wrath of God hanging like grim realities over the head of one's enemies that one can know something of what it means to love and forgive them. I don't think it is Christian to want to get to the New Testament too soon and too directly. We have often talked about this before, and I am more than ever convinced that I am right. You cannot and must not speak the last word before you have spoken the next to last. We live on the next to last word, and believe on the last, don't we?[1]

The unnatural and the natural

Bonhoeffer draws further distinctions in penultimate reality by describing it as distinguished into "unnatural" and "natural" parts. The "unnatural" is that part of penultimate reality in which man closes the door against Christ's coming, against the ultimate. The "natural" is that part which is directed toward his coming.[2] For both aspects "the Fall" into sin by which the creature of God assumes a creaturely independence is presupposed as an accomplished fact. Therefore the distinction between natural and unnatural is a relative one; it is relative to man's being a sinner and in rebellion against his primal creaturely dependence upon God.[3]

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[1] Letters and Papers from Prison, pp. 103-104.

[2] Ethics, p. 102.

[3] See ibid., pp. 102-103.

Man assumes a relative freedom, which he may misuse in an unnatural way.

> For his knowledge of God man renounces the Word of God which constantly descends upon him out of the unenterable middle and limit of life. Man renounces life from this Word and snatches it for himself. He is himself in the middle. Therefore man's being like God is disobedience in the form of obedience, it is will to power in the form of service, it is desire to be a creator in the form of creatureliness, it is being dead in the form of life.[1]

Natural life, even though resulting from the Fall, is validated by Christ and is "the form of life preserved by God for the fallen world and directed towards justification, redemption and renewal through Christ."[2] This form is universal for humanity. Bonhoeffer makes it clear that reason is to be considered as a part of natural, "preserved" life, and not as a "divine principle of knowledge" or as necessarily a part of unnatural and corrupted life. Reason is suited to grasping what is natural because it is a part of the natural, that is, it is derived from the fact of the Fall.[3]

The unnatural is that which treats its liberty as a matter of absolute rights and human autonomy. It is "arbitrary" because it is relative, not to Christ in which true

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1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, trans. John C. Fletcher (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1959), p. 74.

2. Ethics, p. 103.

3. See ibid.

relativity is rightly understood, but to the "void," which is destructive of the natural.[1] At this point there appears to be a chink in Bonhoeffer's basic reality-structure. There is something ontological, something related to non-being about that part of "reality" which opposes God and rejects Christ. But Bonhoeffer withdraws from the possibility of a dualism in consideration of good versus evil and natural versus unnatural by making the unnatural to be effective only temporarily.[2] It will wither away upon the coming of Christ, and so at least indirectly or negatively it is a part of penultimate reality.

The unnatural abuses its relative creaturely liberty by assuming itself to be absolute. There are "extreme" examples of this in "vitalism" and "mechanization." Life must become not only a means to an end but an end in itself. According to his established formula for interpreting reality, Bonhoeffer shows that it is an arbitrary and extreme abstraction to emphasize either of these propositions about life as absolute exclusive of the other. It is only with a balanced and unified recognition that both are true that the natural remains natural and is not twisted into the unnatural.[3] To emphasize either abstractly results in the destruction of life. Another aspect of the unnatural is that it is man attempting to organize his life and environment through reason and programming. But the natural resists organization, says Bonhoeffer, and will recover and prevail because it is directed toward that which is irresistibly coming, namely Christ.[1] The natural is "formed" according to its true form. This is why it resists formation according to the arbitrary categories of human reason.

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[1] See ibid., pp. 104-105.

[2] Ibid., p. 105.

[3] See ibid., pp. 106-107.

Both natural and unnatural, then, are to be understood rightly in relation to ultimate, absolute reality. Man can live life joyfully within the natural, in a freedom which is real because it is relative to Christ. To live naturally is to live in the consciousness that life's decision is already made, because life is an anticipation of the coming of the ultimate. Appropriate to this outlook on natural life is one's natural use of reason as a positive and valid means of interpreting the form of the natural. "The principle of suum cuique is the highest possible attainment of a reason which is in accord with reality and which, within the natural life, discerns the right which is given to the individual by God (of whom reason knows nothing)."[2] "To each his own" as a rational principle of human rights must be understood as relative to the rights of all concerned. It is a valid principle for natural life, a part of the penultimate, and consequently it is limited in itself.[1] Bonhoeffer gives individual rights short shrift in his discussion, largely because he believes that "life itself" will protect the individual, so long, at least, as he recognizes that his individual rights are not self-guaranteed, but rather are guaranteed by God.[2]

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[1] *Ibid*., p. 105.

[2] *Ibid*., p. 111.

Bonhoeffer discusses the right of natural life in terms of bodily life, which he says "carries within itself the right to its own preservation." And "the life of the body, like life in general, is both a means to an end and an end in itself."[3] This means that, in contrast to certain traditional attitudes which have disparaged bodily life and enjoyment of its functions due to a desire to subvert the body to a pursuit of its ultimate fulfillment, Bonhoeffer emphasizes the element of bodily life as being an end in itself. This is illustrated in one of his letters:

> To long for the transcendent when you are in your wife's arms is, to put it mildly, a lack of taste, and it is certainly not what God expects of us. We ought to find

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[1] See *ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

[2] See *ibid.*, pp. 111-112.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 112.

> God and love him in the blessings he sends us. If he pleases to grant us some overwhelming earthly bliss, we ought not to try and be more religious than God himself. For then we should spoil that bliss by our presumption and arrogance; we should be letting our religious fantasies run riot and refusing to be satisfied with what he gives.[1]

There are also certain principles which, while not to be regarded as absolutes, are nevertheless a part of the structure or form of natural life and consequently to be considered as an antidote to a complete situationalism, which is arbitrary. The principles of natural life are: the right to live, "safeguarding the life of the body against arbitrary killing,"[2] "the freedom to offer and to give one's life in sacrifice,"[3] the right of propagation and the right of nascent life,[4] the right to liberty,[5] and the rights of "the life of the mind, "judgment, action, and enjoyment."[6] The way in which Bonhoeffer's thinking operates as a counteraction against complete relativism or situationalism is illustrated in this comment on the question of euthanasia:

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[1] Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 113. Cf. Bonhoeffer's consideration of "play" in Ethics, pp. 114-115.

[2] Ethics, p. 115.

[3] Ibid., p. 122.

[4] See ibid., pp. 128-130.

[5] See ibid., pp. 137-140.

[6] Ibid., p. 140. This section in Bonhoeffer's discussion of natural rights was not finished, although the editor includes his preparatory notes in a footnote.

> It is necessary to state, as a matter of principle, that the decision about the right to destroy human life can never be based upon the concurrence of a number of different contributory factors. Either an argument is cogent enough in itself to bring about this decision, or else it is not cogent at all, and if this is the case, no number of good additional reasons can ever justify such a decision.[1]

One finds then that for Bonhoeffer natural reason is a worthy implement with which to settle perplexing ethical issues, and it is not necessary to succumb completely at any point to "brute facts" or circumstantial determinants.

iii Reality and Ethics

The "warrant" for ethics

Given his interpretation of reality, it is understandable that Bonhoeffer is hesitant to confer his blessing on the usual run of ethical thinking and discussion. His aversion to epistemological partiality, or "abstraction" causes him to repudiate a large amount of traditional and contemporary ethics as "peripheral" to the real task. His insistence that ethics be tied to the "concrete" makes it necessary to exclude most forms of universalization and generalization in ethics.

Bonhoeffer's chief criticisms of ethical discourse are reserved for the kind of ethical generalization which he calls "timeless and placeless." It is a fault of "moralists" that they tend to overlook the concrete situation and strive to enunciate general moral principles which are "completely inadequate and unfitted for coming to grips with" the concrete problems of everyday existence.

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 116. A "cogent" argument is needed for violating a principle of natural life. A cogent argument in this respect could be only one which is "absolutely cogent" in the sense of making the violation of the principle to be an unconditional necessity. See p. 117 also.

> The "ethical" as a theme is tied to a definite time and a definite place. That is so because man is a living and mortal creature in a finite and destructible world and because he is not essentially or exclusively a student of ethics. It is one of the great naïvetés, or, more exactly, one of the great follies, of the moralists that they deliberately overlook this fact and start out from the fiction that at every moment of his life man has to make a final and infinite choice, the fiction that every moment of life involves a conscious decision between good and evil.[1]

So it becomes necessary that the ethicist remain cautious and reserved in his analyses and pronouncements, that his advice may be fitted to those real and concrete situations which are in need of clarification through careful rational thought. Out of respect for "the creaturely wholeness of life," says Bonhoeffer, talk of moral obligation and decision must delimit itself concretely in terms of time and space.[2] For the greater portion of creaturely existence, then, ethical pronouncements are not needed. The ethical is an ultimate concern about "shall" and "should," which implies a situation that is not yet, is not a part of the penultimate. And as has been observed in the section concerning the penultimate and the ultimate, Bonhoeffer holds that the penultimate is a part of the real in its own right. Though the penultimate exists in anticipation of the ultimate, it is an affront against the ultimate to want to annul the penultimate through human intervention or discussion. In addition, the way to safeguard the ultimate character of ethical "shall" and "should" may be not to treat it as a theme at all. "If this obligation, the obligation which goes without saying, is made a topic for discussion, then it all too easily loses its quality as an ultimate and becomes a penultimate, a method."[1] The times when ethical discourse concerning principles and ultimate decisions become necessary are times when the moral course is not self-evident, but these are the exception, rather than the rule.[2] And this is as it should be, thinks Bonhoeffer, for the times when ethics is not necessary are the concrete moments in which life is lived at its center and to the full. It is a kind of abstract and unreal motivation which causes communities and individuals to wish to concentrate continually upon ethical themes at the expense of concrete, undiscussed living.[3]

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[1] Ibid., p. 232.

[2] See ibid., p. 233.

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[1] Ibid., p. 234.

[2] See ibid., pp. 234-235.

[3] See ibid., pp. 235-236.

Ethics has a "warrant," then, whenever there is a concrete need for the application of ethical rationality to complicated life-situations in which the course is not clear and self-evident. But a concrete warrant does not call for nor does it allow the entrance of "timeless and placeless ethical discourse." What is required is intelligent consideration of the situation itself, in light of the structure of reality, by one whose office or position authorizes him so to speak. Ethics acquires its strength through concentration in a delimited situation, whereas it is weakened severely when one attempts to apply general principles to particular contexts.[1]

The authorization for ethical discussion and advice is conferred by God through the essential form or structure of the real.

> "No one can confer upon himself the warrant for ethical discourse; it is imparted to a man, it is assigned to him, not primarily on the basis of subjective accomplishments and merits, but on the basis of an objective position in the world. . . . What finds expression here is that disparity which is so extremely offensive to modern sensibilities but which is inherent and essential in the ethical, namely, the disparity between the superior and the inferior."[2]

It is this kind of difference and order of hierarchy which gives ethics its objectivity and its character. Social structure is implied; ethics is the prerogative of an office, not of a personality.

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[1] See ibid., pp. 238-239.

[2] Ibid., p. 239.

Bonhoeffer accuses the attempt to level and equalize mankind, "this new conception of the ethical, which was to establish a universal union of mankind in the place of a fossilized form of society characterized by the antagonism of privileged and unprivileged members,"[1] of achieving the opposite of what it originally intended.

> "The ethical, in this sense of the formal, the universally valid and the rational, contained no element of concretion, and it therefore inevitably ended in the total atomization of human society and of the life of the individual, in unlimited subjectivism and individualism. . . . The underlying factor is always that the ethical is destroyed by its being detached from its concrete relations. That is so simply because the ethical is not essentially a formal rational principle but a concrete relation between the giver and the receiver of commands."[2]

But Bonhoeffer does not mean to establish that the use of reason is inappropriate to ethics, or that there is nothing which is universally valid in a rational overcoming of unjust social relations. On the contrary, he shows that reason finds the true structure of reality and relates human actions to this form. Rather, he means to clarify the function of

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1. Ibid., pp. 239-240. Bonhoeffer cites a new situation in human relations with these words: "In other ages it may have been the duty of Christians to champion the equality of all men. Our duty today, however, is passionately to defend the sense of reserve between man and man." Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 28.

2. Ethics, p. 240.

reason, which rightly is to be interpreted as perceiving and accepting reality, in this case the reality of ethical propositions. The trouble with human reason lies not with reason itself as a function of the real man, but rather with man's abstracting reason from reality by making it an autonomous principle for disgorging ethical pronouncements.[1]

Reality and the good

For an understanding of "the good," according to Bonhoeffer, one must first understand the reality of God as conformed to the form of Christ. God's whole reality is good. This of course includes the concrete world. It is necessary to emphasize the goodness of this world and the natural. The good is not an ideal set apart from reality to be striven for or only approximated, but it is reality within reality; it is this life as conformed to its true form.

The good is perceived and determined concretely, for those who consider the good are living men who live concretely first of all and whose thought is but one element of their concrete existences.

> The question of good is posed and is decided in the midst of each definite, yet unconcluded, unique and transient situation of our lives, in the midst of our living relationships with men, things, institutions and powers, in other words in the midst of our historical existence. The question of good cannot now

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[1] See *ibid.*, pp. 240-241.

> be separated from the question of life, the question of history.[1]

Again we encounter Bonhoeffer's strictures against an abstract concept which is isolated from concrete reality. There exists no absolute criterion of good and evil, he avers, because for man life is just not lived as repeated encounters with absolutes. No formulas or principles, absolutely drawn, can serve to guide man in his choice of values in changing situations. The question of good must above all else be related to life, which is reality itself.

> The decision between the clearly-known good and the clearly-known evil excludes human knowledge itself from the decision; it transposes the ethical into the struggle between the knowledge, which is already oriented towards the good, and the will, which still offers resistance, and it thereby fails to bring about that authentic decision in which the whole man, complete with his knowledge and his will, seeks and finds the good in the equivocal complexity of a historical situation solely through the venture of the deed.[2]

In short, an absolutist ethics is partial and abstract. And for Bonhoeffer this is tantamount to its being unreal and therefore valueless. The good as abstract cannot be truly good.[3]

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[1] Ibid., p. 185.

[2] Ibid., p. 186.

[3] Bonhoeffer accuses Reinhold Niebuhr of making an abstract distinction between "moral man" and "immoral society." He holds that it is not the case that either individual or society can make an ethical decision apart from the other, since in reality they are always in a relationship

Life as reality is reckoned so that Jesus Christ is "the origin, and the essence and the goal." If Jesus Christ is not known as such, then life becomes abstract in either a "mere biological" or "ideological" sense. Life becomes divided against itself; it becomes partial and unreal.[1] Bonhoeffer is presupposing here a Christian doctrine of man according to a holistic distinction between body and spirit. It is possible to "split man up" into his constituent parts and emphasize one or another of the parts as the whole man. It is this kind of thinking, reckoning, and living which Bonhoeffer classes as "abstraction." He observes that while we are living we cannot possibly define what life is in itself; we can only live, and this is enough. For "life is not a thing, an entity or concept; it is a person, a particular and unique person . . . the I of Jesus."[2] So good in this way of reckoning becomes indicative: "I am the life," rather than descriptive: "I have the life."[3] Knowledge of

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of unity. Niebuhr's distinction is abstract, he feels, because in making the distinction one compares individual and social ethical decisions according to some arbitrary "ethical yardstick" in terms of either motives or consequences. His point is that good is reality, and cannot be abstracted from reality if ethical validity is to be retained. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 58-60.

[1] See *ibid.*, pp. 189-191.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 188.

[3] *Ibid.*; see John 14:6 and 11:25.

one's living from without, according to the form of Christ, comes not from self-analysis but through revelation, as apprehended in faith in response to the word of God.[1] This means living "in tension between the negation and the affirmation" of our life which God pronounces. For we are living in contradiction to Christ, this unique Person, our true life, and yet in perceiving our apostasy we become reconciled once again, also through Christ, to our true life.

> This is the life that we cannot give to ourselves, the life that comes to us entirely from without, entirely from beyond; and yet it is not a remote or alien life, of no concern to ourselves, but it is our own real daily life. This life lies hidden only behind the symbol of death, the symbol of negation.[2]

Therefore life as the good is to be lived as it really is. Man is to live with his decision already made for him, without the necessity for constant soul-searching consideration for either his moral obligations or his values. The actions of the Christian "spring from joy in the accomplishment of the reconciliation of the world with God; they spring from the peace which comes with the completion of the work of salvation in Jesus Christ; they spring from the all-embracing life which is Jesus Christ."[3] There are occasions during which ethical thought and speech becomes necessary, as indicated in the previous section, but these are normally rare and should be kept brief as possible.

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[1] Ibid., p. 189.

[2] Ibid. Bonhoeffer here refers to Bultmann's Das Evangelium des Johannes, pp. 21ff.

[3] Ibid., p. 191.

In some of his letters Bonhoeffer describes what he calls the "polyphony" of life. This is a notion of a harmonious existence in which life is lived in variety and enjoyment and cultural proliferation, but whose very polyphony depends on its relation to the "*cantus firmus*" or the "ground bass" which God sounds steadily. Thus "earthly affection," "sensual love," and passion take their tonal quality as relative to the deep, firm tone of God. The various themes of life are all at counterpoint to each other and all relate to the basic tone. "Where the ground bass is firm and clear, there is nothing to stop the counterpoint from being developed to the utmost of its limits. Both ground bass and counterpoint are 'without confusion and yet distinct,' in the words of the Chalcedonian formula, like Christ in his divine and human natures."[1] Bonhoeffer also remarks about life's "multi-dimensional" aspects, wherein by faith the Christian experiences a many-sided existence in which he is able to live life to the full and make the most of even very trying experiences, such as an air raid.[2]

Today goodness is ontological, thinks Bonhoeffer. It is reckoned in relation to one's being, which is relative to Christ.

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[1] *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 175.

[2] See *ibid.*, p. 190.

> It was the experience of other times that the wicked found their way to Christ while the good remained remote from Him. The experience of our own time is that it is the good who find their way back to Christ and that the wicked obstinately remain aloof from Him. Other times could preach that a man must first become a sinner, like the publican and the harlot, before he could know and find Christ, but we in our time must say rather that before a man can know Christ he must first become righteous like those who strive and who suffer for the sake of justice, truth and humanity.[1]

This does not mean that reality is thus after all divided into the good and the evil, for "Christ belongs both to the wicked and to the good,"[2] as sinners justified and sanctified by Him. It is not necessary for one to become either good or evil in order to be Christ's, but yet the times with their cultural emphases somehow affect the way in which the reality of Christ is best proclaimed and apprehended.[3]

And also in relation to a portrayal of the times relative to the good and to reality, Bonhoeffer notes that there seems to be a "return to the origin" of the "goods" and "values" of the Western world. "Reason, culture, humanity, tolerance and self-determination, all these concepts which until very recently had served as battle slogans against the Church, against Christianity, against Jesus Christ Himself, . . .

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1. Ethics, p. 182.
2. Ibid.
3. See ibid., pp. 183-184.

now, suddenly and surprisingly, come very near indeed to the Christian standpoint."[1] The "secular" concepts themselves are once more being allied with Christianity, an accomplishment of "secular" thinkers! It is in this way that the Christian should understand culture, that it is God's reality returning to its origin which is Christ. The Church should not therefore reject the good within the world nor remain aloof from it.

> It should not be difficult for us to forfeit our privileges; recognizing the justice of history. We may have to face events and changes which run counter to our rights and wishes. But if so, we shall not give way to bitterness and foolish pride, but consciously submit to divine judgment, and thus prove our worthiness to survive by identifying ourselves generously and unselfishly with the life of the community and the interests of our fellow men.[2]

The locus of ethical living: the individual in community

Bonhoeffer considers ethical individualism a dangerous way of thinking. It is another kind of "abstraction," in that when the individual is considered in isolation from others he is being cut off from the real form of man, which takes its shape not in manhood itself, but in Christ. Inasmuch as a man is often directly obliged to act for and in place of others "he combines in himself the selves of a number of human beings," which is evidence of the basic reality that the ethical agent is not to be understood as isolated. It is unreal thinking to abstract or isolate an individual from his community, and it is equally unreal thinking which makes that individual to consider ideal possibilities of choosing in ethics. Again, it is not a question of acting concretely without thinking, as opposed to rational thought apart from action, the latter being unreal in Bonhoeffer's eyes. It is that both the thinking and the acting are understood as fundamentally one reality, God's reality, and it is an abstraction to think that either one's activities or one's thoughts can be isolated.[1]

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 177.

[2] *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 186.

The life of the Christian is conformed to the form of Christ. This entails having the same attitude toward life and toward ethical decision-making that Jesus had. According to Bonhoeffer, Jesus remained aloof from arbitration in the various conflicts and decisions of life, when disciples and others approached him with hopes of drawing him into the conflict as problem-solver.[2] The ultimate questions are already answered, the truly vital problem, that of man's alienation from man and from God, has already been "solved." This means that the supposed "vital" and "ultimate" questions which beset man and about which man's concern becomes so involved and entangled are in truth penultimate questions. This does not mean that they are necessarily inconsequential or unimportant, however. They do require a penultimate and this-worldly solution, but they are not "ultimate," and therefore are not as crucial as men often tend to imagine. For Jesus, life is therefore not a matter of continual problem-solving of vital questions, but rather it is being responsive to the will of God. It is a life of simplicity and freedom.

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[1] Cf. Ethics, pp. 185, 195.

[2] See ibid., pp. 151-152.

> The freedom of Jesus is not the arbitrary choice of one amongst innumerable possibilities; it consists on the contrary precisely in the complete simplicity of His action, which is never confronted by a plurality of possibilities, conflicts or alternatives, but always only by one thing. This one thing Jesus calls the will of God. He says that to do this will is His meat. This will of God is His life. He lives and acts not by the knowledge of good and evil but by the will of God. There is only one will of God. In it the origin is recovered; in it there is established the freedom and the simplicity of all action.[1]

So the only really "crucial" problem which the Christian man must decide is the answer to the question "What is the will of God?". But even here it is not a matter which rests purely on human decision. Man must make the decision, but he makes it in conformity to the form of Christ, who is the true form of all mankind. Determining the will of God can never be a purely "arbitrary" human decision in abstraction

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1. Ibid., p. 154.

from God or from concrete reality or from other human beings who are likewise participants in this form of Christ. The understanding of reality as unity and unreality as disunity is applicable once again. Man knows the will of God simply by living--in the awareness and realization that Christ is his true origin, essence, and goal. Man does God's will within this realization, for the realization is effective in transforming man, ontologically, so that his existence is naturally directed toward the coming of Christ, whereas prior to the realization it is unnaturally and unreally closed, isolated against that coming. Proving or determining the will of God "takes place solely on the basis of a 'metamorphosis', a complete inward transmutation of one's previous form, a 'renewing of the mind' (Rom. 12.2), a 'walking as children of light' (Eph. 5.8)."[1] The form of Adam (isolated and disunited man, who is able to discriminate between good and evil but who is unable to do God's will) is overcome by taking on the form of Christ.

So God's will can be proved only from within the unity of realized reality, based on a transformation of man, from unreal to real. The actual "proving" of God's will is done through thought and action, perhaps never easily as far as human reason is concerned. For the will of God within the penultimate depends on the penultimate itself. "The will of God is not a system of rules which is established from the outset; it is something new and different in each different situation in life, and for this reason a man must ever anew examine what the will of God may be. The heart, the understanding, observation and experience must all collaborate in this task."[1] It is the united, the whole man, with full use of all of his faculties and techniques, who determines what the will of God is penultimately, concretely, within situations. And one simply does what is the will of God, once this has been determined in penultimate situations. One does not make the most of doing God's will, one does not stop to take stock of the times in which God's will has been done and thus assess one's own goodness. Likewise, one need not be continually anxious concerning whether or not one is doing or has done God's will, for the ultimate decision has already been made.

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[1] Ibid., p. 162.

> Anxiety as to whether one has done the right thing will not now become a desperate clinging to one's own goodness or swing round into the assuredness of the knowledge of good and evil, but it will be dispelled in the knowledge of Jesus Christ who alone delivers the judgment of mercy; it will cause a man's own goodness to lie hidden until the proper time in the knowledge and the mercy of the Judge.[2]

The "Christian" life, the life of the real man, is a life lived "in correspondence with reality" (Wirklichkeitsgemässheit). It is a life in which inspiration is received, but never as an end in itself, since a hasty dependence upon direct inspiration can lead to a kind of self-deception. "The whole apparatus of human powers must be set in motion when it is a matter of proving what is the will of God."[1] And yet the real man acts in confidence, in faith that his thought and his necessary action are indeed in correspondence with reality.

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[1] Ibid., p. 161.

[2] Ibid., p. 164.

> There will be the belief that if a man asks God humbly God will give him certain knowledge of His will; and then, after all this earnest proving, there will also be the freedom to make a real decision, and with it the confidence that it is not man but God Himself who, through this proving, gives effect to His will.[2]

(1) The responsible man

> Henceforward man cannot be conceived and known otherwise than in Jesus Christ, and God cannot be conceived and known otherwise than in the human form of Jesus Christ. In Him we see humanity as that which God has accepted, borne and loved, and as that which is reconciled with God. . . . There is no relation to men without a relation to God, and no relation to God without a relation to men, and it is only our relation to Jesus Christ which provides the basis for our relation to men and to God.[3]

With these words Bonhoeffer sets forth the basis and structure of the life in correspondence with reality. This is a life of "responsibility," because it is lived in response to God and to other men. This concept of responsibility is distinctively a Christian concept, "intended as referring to the concentrated totality and unity of the response to the reality which is given to us in Jesus Christ."[1] A responsible life is a pledged and committed life. It is a life lived freely in concrete situations which are limited in penultimate scope. It is a life of "deputyship" in relation to others, a life in which the real man assumes and bears guilt in suffering. And it is a life lived in pertinent relation to the impersonal aspects of nature, to things and "causes."[2]

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[1] *Ibid.*

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 192.

Bonhoeffer asserts that freedom which corresponds to reality is the freedom which is given to man in "the obligation to God and to our neighbour as they confront us in Jesus Christ."[3] This is a situation of relativity in which free and responsible action is performed. This is true because of the "twilight which the historical situation spreads over good and evil," because there exist "innumerable perspectives in which every given phenomenon appears."[4] In short, there are simply no ethical laws or rules into which one can withdraw from free decision and action, there is no abstract authority to which one can appeal for either conviction or acquittal. Let us remember that this is not an "abstract" freedom either, that is, it is not the freedom which man has seized for himself and now defends valiantly against unjust absolutists. But it is a freedom which is a part of being in the new reality, the one reality of God in Christ. It is neither sought nor won by human striving, but it is given as a part of being really human in God's reality. And let us reiterate that this kind of holistic freedom is realized in obligation. Freedom which is realized in obligation is unified and real. The truly free life is one which is pledged and committed to God's guidance.

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[1] *Ibid.*

[2] See *ibid.*, pp. 205-209.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 217.

[4] *Ibid.*

> The man of responsibility stands between obligation and freedom; he must dare to act under obligation and in freedom; yet he finds his justification neither in his obligation nor in his freedom but solely in Him who has put him in this (humanly impossible) situation and who requires this deed of him. The responsible man delivers up himself and his deed to God.[1]

The kind of situation in which the responsible man must work out his obligation in freedom is limited and concrete. Mercifully this is so. Under the strain of prison life, Bonhoeffer can still say "it has been borne in upon me here with peculiar force that a concrete situation can always be mastered, and that only fear and anxiety magnify them [times of separation from loved ones] to an immeasurable degree beforehand."[1] And also, "there is a wholeness about the fully grown man which makes him concentrate on the present moment."[2] There is a proper delimitation of ethical place and time which is eminently necessary if one is not to be overburdened with it all. This also allows for life to go on responsibly when "ethical discourse" is not being undertaken.[3] In all there is a finiteness, because the situation is always penultimate. The limitation, though, in accordance with the fundamental apprehension of reality as often reiterated herein, is never isolated from the whole of reality, but rather "embraces the whole." But it is limited because human knowledge in general is limited, and because the nature of reality is such that the particular lies within the universal.[4]

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[1] Ibid., p. 221.

Responsibility includes the responsibility for others. Bonhoeffer states that "we are continuing along the lines of the Bible if we say that in answering for Christ, for life, before men, and only thus, I am at the same time accepting responsibility for men before Christ."[5] The responsible man is a mediator, a priest, in a double sense: he answers to men for Christ and answers to Christ for men. Bonhoeffer uses the word "deputyship" (Stellvertretung) to describe the responsible life. In true deputyship the factor of relationship is of greatest importance. This is so because of the fact that it is possible to abuse one's deputyship by making an absolute (abstraction) of either one's own ego, as "the priest," or of the other man. Action resulting from either of these absolutisms is arbitrary. It is either tyrannical, if one's own ego be absolutized, or else it lacks in reckoning with the totality of responsibility, if the other man's welfare be absolutized.[1]

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[1] Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 121.

[2] Ibid., p. 148.

[3] Cf. Ethics, p. 233.

[4] See ibid., p. 203.

[5] Ibid., p. 193.

The origin of responsibility is found in the reconciling action of Jesus Christ. "Jesus took upon Himself the guilt of all men, and for that reason every man who acts responsibly becomes guilty."[2] The guilt is not something which can or should be avoided. It is a part of the reality of the reconciliation which has been accomplished and is ever being accomplished in relationships. Trying to escape from guilt involves a man in "detachment" from his own true origin, essence, and goal. There is a "redeeming mystery" by which God reconciles the whole world to himself. God justifies

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1. See ibid., p. 196.

2. Ibid., p. 210..

the world through incurring guilt himself. The essence of the gospel message lies in this. Should a man attempt to escape from incurring guilt for others, thereby he incurs a "more irredeemable guilt" than before. "Real innocence shows itself precisely in a man's entering into the fellowship of guilt for the sake of other men. Through Jesus Christ it becomes an essential part of responsible action that the man who is without sin loves selflessly and for that reason incurs guilt."[1] Innocence or freedom from sin is something which man cannot achieve for himself through his own efforts. But paradoxically man can achieve something of a "relative freedom from sin"[2] by doing what his own intelligence tells him is the opposite from what he should be doing, that is, accepting guilt for others. For example, it may be necessary "to tell a robust lie for the sake of my friend," at least when that friend's well-being depends on my telling the lie. This is incurring guilt for the sake of reality, for what is real is the essential unity of the relationship between people.[3]

The concept of limitation applies also to the matter of responsibility in terms of assumed guilt, however. One's own ego is also to be reckoned as valuable, and to assume guilt for others to the extremity of annihilating oneself would be an abstraction, that is, it would not take into consideration the factor of relationship or unity of the self with the other. In order for the relationship to be maintained, there must be a self. This fact makes for a great multiplicity and complexity of responsible decisions, for it must be reckoned how much guilt can be withstood by the self lest it break down and be destroyed.[1] And withal one must remain humble. It is possible to become conceited in the knowledge of one's own unselfishness. It is necessary to remember one's dependence upon the grace of God. "Before other men the man of free responsibility is justified by necessity; before himself he is acquitted by his conscience; but before God he hopes only for mercy."[2]

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid., p. 213.

[3] See ibid., p. 214.

The man of responsibility also assumes a definite relationship to things, causes, laws, to the world in general. This relationship also is established by God, in the sense that "through Christ the world of things and of values is once more directed towards mankind as it was in the Creation."[3] There is an essential nature of things and values which must be respected in our knowledge and use of things. Things are "essentially directed towards man." This means that they are not simply to be utilized by man. Even things are thus seen as being in relationship--this is their essential nature, and this nature can be destroyed by man's wrong attitudes and actions.[1]

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[1] See ibid., p. 215.

[2] Ibid., p. 216.

[3] Ibid., p. 196.

The relation of the responsible man to the domain of things is called "pertinence" (Sachgemässheit) by Bonhoeffer. Things and causes are "purified" in their relation to the world of persons. Everything has its own "law of being," or "essential nature," as mentioned above. The domain of things includes products of nature and also products of the human mind, that is, it includes both material and ideal reality.[2] The responsible man "lives and acts in limited responsibility and thereby allows the world ever anew to disclose its essential character to him." The world of "things" is neither good nor evil in itself; "the world remains the world" because "all reality is founded upon Jesus Christ Himself." Bonhoeffer expresses his concept of the responsible man's relation to the world in these words:

> No man has the mission to overleap the world and to make it into the kingdom of God. Nor, on the other hand, does this give support to that pious indolence which abandons the wicked world to its fate and seeks only to rescue its own virtue.[3]

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[1] See *ibid.*, pp. 196-197.

[2] See *ibid.*, pp. 205-206.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 202.

(2) Obedience

Bonhoeffer makes it clear that what he says concerning "responsibility" is meant to be a description of the life of the "real man" whoever he may be, whatever may be his station or situation in life, and for every moment in his life. This he accomplishes by linking the concept of "responsibility" with that of "obedience." The same ethic is applicable to all. Every life can experience true responsibility because it takes place in reality within relationships of obedience. "Obedience and responsibility are interlinked in such a way that one cannot say that responsibility begins only where obedience leaves off, but rather that obedience is rendered in responsibility."[1] Since men are related ultimately to God as realized in Jesus Christ and in their conformity to his form, they can live in free responsibility even though in servitude and complete obedience to others.[2]

For the real man, obedience has meaning inasmuch as one responds to the concrete call of Christ. The call is direct, its claim over man is total, and a total response and commitment are the only alternatives possible for man in reality. The call is received in a personal encounter with the person of Christ, an encounter which "is a testimony to the absolute,

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1. *Ibid.*, p. 220

2. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 220-221.

direct, and unaccountable authority of Jesus."[1] Man's response is in discipleship, an act of obedience to a personal and living Christ. Obedience to the call of Christ liberates man from his own restrictions and abstractions, from the "yoke" of "manmade dogmas" and laws which afflict his conscience.

> We can only achieve perfect liberty and enjoy fellowship with Jesus when His command, His call to absolute discipleship, is appreciated in its entirety. Only the man who follows the command of Jesus without reserve, and submits unresistingly to His yoke, finds His burden easy, and under its gentle pressure receives the power to persevere in the right way.[2]

There is an immediacy and a concreteness to the call and man's response which cannot and should not be avoided. The limited area of responsibility is necessary, but due to the real nature of the relationship it must be understood that the calling is multi-dimensional, and that man is responsible for the whole. "Through this relation to Christ the 'limited field of accomplishments' is freed from its isolation. Its boundary is broken through not only from above, that is to say by Christ, but also in an outward direction,"[3] in human relationships which though concrete in actuality are universal in scope. This kind of responsibility for action can never be described or controlled by laws. It is the concrete

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1. The Cost of Discipleship, p. 50.
2. Ibid., p. 31.
3. Ethics, p. 225.

call of Christ which determines both the limits and the extensions of the area of man's responsibility; man cannot do this from his own end, either by absolute principles or by ideal theories.[1]

At this point it is appropriate to reintroduce the concept of "this-worldliness" or "this-sidedness" which occupied part of Bonhoeffer's thinking concerning ethics during his prolonged prison stay. In a letter dated July 28, 1944, he discusses the notion of the life of the disciple in relation to the contradictory themes of blessing and suffering. He finds that in the Old Testament the blessing of God was sought, and that this blessing must be understood as "earthly" or material rather than spiritual. Bonhoeffer thinks that the New Testament does not "spiritualize" the blessings of the Old Testament. He believes that it is possible, and indeed preferable, in light of his conception of the fundamental unity of reality, to unite the spiritual and the material, rather than separating or isolating them in opposition. If this is accomplished, then the earthly blessings are understood as contingent upon God's decree, as indeed are the sufferings. Man is thus to expect both blessing and suffering during his earthly life. And both are fraught with meaning, because reality is a whole. Once again, the notion of reality is used to bind together in paradoxical unity concepts which one is accustomed to make disparate and mutually exclusive.[1] For Bonhoeffer, the suffering of this world holds much meaning, for it is a "way to freedom." His deliverance consisted in total commitment to God. "Whether our deeds are wrought in faith or not depends on our realization that suffering is the extension of action and the perfection of freedom."[2]

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[1] See ibid., p. 226.

(3) Love

Responding to the call of Christ in obedience means perhaps above all else that one is commanded to love his neighbor. Bonhoeffer's section in the *Ethics* dealing with love and responsibility either was never finished or was not preserved, so it may appear as though he gives this central teaching of Christian ethics short shrift. This is not the case. In interpreting the commandment to love our neighbor, he shows that the scope of loving is universal. That is, one's neighbor is *not* only the one who is nearest in terms of space or affection. We are responsible for loving the one who is furthest from us--this as a test of whether we truly love our *neighbor* or whether we in truth love only ourselves and our duty![3]

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[1] See *Letters and Papers from Prison*, pp. 231-232.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 232.

[3] Cf. *Ethics*, pp. 227-228.

Love "is the decisive word which marks the distinction between man in disunion and man in the origin."[1] Love is not something which man can drum up out of his own human resources: "as a human attitude, as conviction, devotion, sacrifice, the will to fellowship, feeling, brotherhood, service or action."[2] This is true, Bonhoeffer believes, because love in its essence means something entirely different from these. "It is the essence of love that it should lie beyond all disunion."[3] The biblical "God is love " (I John 4:16) must be interpreted with the emphasis upon God rather than upon love. "Only he who knows God knows what love is; it is not the other way round; it is not that we first of all by nature know what love is and therefore know also what God is."[4] What love is can be understood only by knowing Jesus Christ, for Christ is the revelation of God, which love also is. Love therefore is not something which man does; it is something which is done to man, namely "the transformation of one's entire existence by God."[5] So when man loves it is the love of God flowing through him. Man is active, but with respect to the source of his love he is passive.[1]

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[1] Ibid., p. 172.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., pp. 172-173.

[4] Ibid., p. 173.

[5] Ibid., p. 175.

A fuller treatment of love in the Christian community is found in an earlier work of Bonhoeffer's, Sanctorum Communio, where love is interpreted as a transforming relationship that results from God's activity in moving man through the Holy Spirit. Love is Christ within the human heart, which so transforms that heart that it henceforth is able to will the good which is God's will.[2] The Kingdom of God is actualized in individual hearts and consequently in the Church community, for love makes concrete "not the metaphysical but the moral social relationship."[3] This is equivalent to establishing the concrete community, for the moral social relationship which was broken due to sin remains broken in human society, except through the activity of the Holy Spirit, in injecting God's love into the human heart.[4] It is now possible for a man to love others, and in so doing to be fulfilling the will of God.

The Christian concept of love (agape) is something special, because though "the moral command to love is not

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1. See ibid., pp. 175-176.
2. See The Communion of Saints, pp. 118-119.
3. Ibid., p. 119.
4. See ibid.

specifically Christian, . . . the reality of love is nevertheless present only in Christ and his church."[1] Bonhoeffer sums up the special meaning of the Christian concept of love under five heads:

> 1. Christian love is not a human possibility. It is nothing to do with the humanitarian idea or feelings of liking, with eroticism or sympathy.
> 2. It is possible only through faith in Christ and through the work of the Holy Spirit. . . .
> 3. Love, as an act of the will, is purposive. It is not mere baseless inclination, but, bearing within it the strength imparted by the complete absence of any claim, it is just as much a matter of rational reflection as of the empathy possible to human beings. . . .
> 4. Christian love loves the real neighbour, not because of any pleasure it might take in his individuality, but because as a man he invokes the other man, that is, because he acts as a Thou and makes the other experience God's claim in this Thou. The other does not, however, love God in his 'neighbour', but loves the concrete Thou; he loves him by placing his own self, his entire will, at his service. .. .
> 5. Christian love knows no limits. It seeks the realisation of God's lordship absolutely everywhere. Its limits are only where God himself has set them.[2]

God's concrete commandment

The reality of God is realized in human affairs in the form of a concrete commandment. This is a commandment which is total and absolute for man; man can respond to God's commandment only in obedience or disobedience. It is clear and needs no interpretation, for it is "the speech of God to man."

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 120.

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 120-122 *passim*.

It is the only basis for the "ethical" theory and advice which is proper to man. It comes down to man "from above," not having its source in the created world itself.[1] God's commandment is concrete, that is, it is in definite historical form and to a definite historical person. It is revealed always and only in the unique person, Jesus Christ.[2]

God's commandment comes to man concretely in the historical form of the "mandates," church, family, labor, and government. These four are given authority from above to proclaim God's commandment to man. But none of these can with legitimacy claim to be absolute. The commandment itself is absolute, but the proclaimer of the commandment is not absolute. The absoluteness and supremacy are verified in the way in which it is effective in history.

> The supremacy of the commandment of God is shown precisely by the fact that it juxtaposes and coordinates these authorities in a relation of mutual opposition and complementarity and that it is only in this multiplicity of concrete correlations and limitations that the commandment of God takes effect as the commandment which is manifest in Jesus Christ.[3]

God's commandment in human life is seen and experienced as that which encompasses the whole area of life and all of man's actions. It both binds and looses. It both obligates and is permissive. It exists in stern laws and in ordinary principle-free routines as well. "The commandment of God becomes the element in which one lives without always being conscious of it, and, thus it implies freedom of movement and of action, freedom from the fear of decision, freedom from fear to act, it implies certainty, quietude, confidence, balance and peace."[1] Man obeys the commandment of God by learning to "accept as holy realities" the various realities of his life.

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[1] See *Ethics*, pp. 244-246.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 246.

[3] *Ibid.*

The commandment is paradoxical also in that it "commands freedom." "It is by overcoming this contradiction that it shows itself to be God's commandment; the impossible becomes possible, and that which lies beyond the range of what can be commanded, liberty, is the true object of this commandment."[2] This means that the "natural" man is holy and good before God, for he is the man who acts freely and naturally completely aside from his consideration of "ethical" decisions. The "ethical" cannot comprehend this, that the whole of life is good as it naturally is. Nevertheless this is the meaning of God's commandment, insists Bonhoeffer.[3] The "ethical" requires that there be "clarity" and "directness," while reality is not usually this way. For Bonhoeffer, this does not mean that natural reality needs to be straightened out or clarified, but it means rather that the "ethical" should be placed in its proper perspective, namely, as that occasional resource which man needs when his natural situations become too tangled and muddled for him to act with complete naturalness.

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[1] Ibid., p. 247.

[2] Ibid., p. 248.

[3] See ibid., p. 249.

Man can live under God's commandment with his moment of commitment behind him, freely and without feelings of guilt and pressure. "Before the commandment of God man does not permanently stand like Hercules at the crossroads. He is not everlastingly striving for the right decision. He is not always wearing himself out in a conflict of duties. He is not continually failing and beginning again."[1] This theme receives repetition in Bonhoeffer's writings; therefore it bears a bit of reiteration herein. The essence of all of this is that Bonhoeffer believes that the real man who is transformed and conformed to the form of Christ already is justified, and that therefore the natural life which he normally lives is holy and pleasing to God. His ethical thinking, on the contrary, while it too should be a part of the justified natural life, too often in history has been treated as a special case, as a superior realm of values. As such it is unreal, peripheral, whereas it should be at the center of life. For in Bonhoeffer's "realized" ethic, even the "ethical thinker must come to realize that his thought is but a part of the basic unified reality, and thus it is one with his actions, and with the thought and actions of all men. In short, "God's commandment is the only warrant for ethical discourse."[1]

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 250.

(1) Distinctions within God's commandment

God's commandment requires man to live a life of unity. But this does not mean that there can be no diversity. Reality is a diversity within unity. The diversity is that aspect of reality as it appears to man through his disunited perspective. But God through Christ brings unity to the disunited, and thus the student who properly understands God's reality and Christian ethics in relation to it must come to see that the diversity which he perceives is "natural" and "penultimate" in lieu of, in preparation for, and in anticipation of the ultimate unity which will inevitably come about. Penultimate situations, albeit that they are concrete and finite, are situations in which the disunity has not been totally abolished, and therefore concrete man in his penultimate preparation for unity perceives distinctions in God's reality. Naturally, man believes the distinctions to be

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[1] Ibid., p. 244.

"real" and permanent. But this is only a "partial" perspective, an "abstraction" which needs to be overcome in the thinking of the real and justified man.

One distinction which has meaning for penultimate man with his natural powers of reason is the distinction between "law" and "gospel." The "law" is God's way of working in the world through the secular institutions, through the mandates other than the Church. It is God's means of restraining evil and preserving order within a disunited world. The "gospel" is God's way of working in the world by forgiveness of the world's disunity. It is his judging and redeeming and restoring and reconciling way. For Bonhoeffer it is necessary both to distinguish between law and gospel and to hold them together as God's dual action among men. God's love for the world is revealed in both ways. "The two can never be separated; nor can they ever be identified."[1] One must never be subsumed into the other. This again is paradoxical, but it fits Bonhoeffer's basic understanding of reality, the kind of reality which must be responsibly accepted through faith and understood, as it were, "from above."

(2) The mandates

By the term "mandate" we understand the concrete

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1. Ibid., p. 321.

> divine commission which has its foundation in the revelation of Christ and which is evidenced by Scripture; it is the legitimation and warrant for the execution of a definite commandment, the conferment of divine authority on an earthly agent.[1]

The mandates are God's authority among men, taking shape in definite and concrete human situations. Bonhoeffer wishes, in his description of the divine mandates, "to restore the old notion of the institution, the estate and the office."[2] The mandates are "conjoined" and interdependent because they are all dependent on God's one commandment as revealed in Jesus Christ. Therefore their authority is established "from above," and never from below or through any human auspices. The authority which the mandates carry is received in a clear awareness of the structure of superiority and inferiority which is established by the commandment of God. This is not an earthly superiority and inferiority in which situations of "mutual limitation" are set up, but it is one in which all earthly persons are subject and inferior to the authority of God, and therefore earthly authorities are to be understood always in this light.[3] It is by the means of such divine authority that Bonhoeffer believes the Western world can eventually resume its true form.

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[1] Ibid., p. 254.

[2] Ibid. He is seeking to describe the "pure original sense" of the "concrete divine commission," and finds these other terms are secularized or outdated or possessed of overly-conservative connotations which render them ineffective for this description and significance.

[3] Ibid., pp. 255-256.

> The genuine order of superior and inferior draws its life from belief in the commission from 'above', belief in the 'Lord of lords'. This belief alone can exorcize the demonic forces which emerge from below. The collapse of this belief means the total collapse and destruction of the whole structure and order which is established in the world from above.[1]

The four mandates, again, are the Church, marriage and the family, labor, and government. In Bonhoeffer's finished writings preeminence has been given to Church and government. Therefore this discussion will center on these two.

"The mandate of the Church is to proclaim the revelation of God in Jesus Christ."[2] This means that the Church makes known to men God's commandment in terms of both law and gospel. It means that the Church confronts men with the commandment of God always in two forms: preaching and confession. Bonhoeffer shows that preaching and confession, like law and gospel, must always be held together within Church administration of the commandment of God. They are distinct but not separate forms of the one commandment revealed in Christ. Confession is needed in order to make preaching something more than "a proclamation of general moral principles." while preaching is necessary in order to prevent "a

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1. Ibid., p. 257.

2. Ibid., p. 265.

dangerous legalistic casuistry which destroys liberty of faith and which inevitably results in a constant covert interference in the domains of the other divine mandates . . . and so brings about the destruction of the free cooperation of the mandates in order to establish the absolute authority of the mandate of the Church."[1] Bonhoeffer is insistent that none of the four mandates be made absolute at the expense of the others.

There exists in the Church "a clearly differentiated relation of superiority and inferiority" in "the office of proclamation" and "the listening congregation." This earthly authority, let it be reiterated, is established "from above," as a part of divine mandate; it is established "in" and "with" the congregation, but not "by" the congregation.[2] The same applies to the interpretation and preaching of the Scripture, which "is essentially the property of the office of preaching."[3] Bonhoeffer asserts that this is in concern for the place of the Scripture, that its place in the office of preaching and teaching is due to the "divinely ordained relationship between the congregation and the office."[4] This formulation is appropriate to his conception of the mandates and indeed to his basic interpretation of reality.

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[1] Ibid., p. 258.

[2] Ibid., p. 259.

[3] Ibid., p. 260.

[4] Ibid., p. 261.

The Church proclaims "Jesus Christ as the Lord and Savior of his people and of the whole world, and so by summoning all men to fellowship with Him."[1] The world has rejected Jesus Christ and now must be called to accept him as its true form. The gospel is not the abolition of the world, but the reconciliation of the godless world to God, and this in the midst of the world itself; "it is the setting free for life in genuine worldliness."

> A life in genuine worldliness is possible only through the proclamation of Christ crucified; true worldly living is not possible or real in contradiction to the proclamation or side by side with it, that is to say, in any kind of autonomy of the secular sphere; it is possible and real only 'in, with and under' the proclamation of Christ.[2]

Bonhoeffer believes that the Church has the mandate and the responsibility to offer solutions to the problems which beset the world. This is not because the Church is a kind of universal problem-solving agency, but because the reality which the Church proclaims encompasses and overcomes the problems through God's redemption. This is a divine solution--the redemption of men, which in its process makes for solving men's problems. The way in which the Church is to speak to human problems is therefore to proclaim God's commandment and God's redemption, rather than to attack the problems from a strictly human point of view. The point is that the Church must begin with the Word of God to man, and then can proceed within God's Word to the solving of man's problems by the reconciling action of God through Christ.[1]

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[1] Ibid., p. 262.

[2] Ibid., p. 263.

"Government is divinely ordained authority to exercise worldly dominion by divine right. Government is deputyship for God on earth."[2] As with the other mandates, the authority to govern as God's deputy is not derived from earthly auspices, but solely from the commandment of God. Therefore the mandate to govern must be understood, if it is possible for man so to understand, "from above." This again means that faith is required. To understand "from above" is to understand through faith that God's reality is fundamentally one and that God works in, with, and under the various human authorities in their administration of power.[3]

The human expressions of the mandate to govern derive out of natural necessity in a penultimate situation. "The state fulfills the assigned purpose of the human character within the sphere of the natural and creaturely."[4] But it is important to recognize, says Bonhoeffer, that the state abuses its mandate to govern if it does not admit that such human derivation is a limitation upon its own power. The state's power cannot be absolute, both because its authority is from God and because that authority is "conjoined" with the authority of the other mandates in a kind of mutual opposition.[1] The "Fall" into sin makes the state necessary in order to maintain order in a world alienated from its true origin, essence, and goal. But the state in truth is in relation to Jesus Christ, due to the unifying action of God which makes every human institution to be a manifestation of this relationship. It is thus an "abstraction" to view the state as originating from the necessities of human recalcitrance alone.

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[1] See ibid., pp. 318-320.

[2] Ibid., p. 297.

[3] See ibid.

[4] Ibid., p. 298.

> Jesus showed that government can only serve Him, precisely because it is a power which comes down from above, no matter whether it discharges its office well or badly. Both in acquitting Him of guilt and in delivering Him up to be crucified, government was obliged to show that it stands in the service of Jesus Christ. Thus it was precisely through the cross that Jesus won back His dominion over government (Col. 2.15), and, at the end of all things, 'all dominion and government and power' will be both abolished and preserved through Him.[2]

Government is something that is "given" to man, as a part of reality.[3] It is responsible to refrain from usurping

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1. Cf. ibid., p. 257.

2. Ibid., p. 302.

3. Ibid., p. 303.

the mandate of the Church to summon the world to Christ, and to maintain "by the power of the sword an outward justice in which life is preserved and is thus held open for Christ."[1] The Christian is bound to obedience to government so long as government is manifestly faithful to its divine mandate and so long as there is any doubt as to whether government is fulfilling this task. The Christian can rightly disobey government, however, whenever government "openly denies its divine commission and thereby forfeits its claim."[2] And even here the disobedience must be "concrete decision in a single particular case," never an autonomous generalized disobedience.[3] Such is Bonhoeffer's respect for the mandate of government.

> According to Holy Scripture, there is no right to revolution; but there is a responsibility of every individual for preserving the purity of his office and mission and the _polis_. In this way, in the true sense, every individual serves government with his responsibility.[4]

Church and government are mutually mandates of God, effecting God's will among men. Their authority is distinct, but not separate from that of each other and of the other mandates. Neither is to exercise dominion over the other, but each is to perform its divine function in cooperation with and criticism of the other. The Christian is both a citizen and a part of the Church, and in both aspects of reality he serves Christ, only in a different way in each.[1]

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[1] _Ibid._, p. 306.

[2] _Ibid._, p. 307.

[3] _Ibid._

[4] _Ibid._, pp. 314-315.

> No constitutional form can as such exactly represent the actual relative closeness and remoteness of government and Church. Government and Church are bound by the same Lord and are bound together. In their task government and Church are separate, but government and Church have the same field of action, man. No single one of these relationships must be isolated so as to provide the basis for a particular constitutional form (for example in the sequence state church, free church, national church); the true aim is to provide room within every given form for the relationship which is, in fact, instituted by God and to entrust the further development to the Lord of both government and Church.[2]

There is no "absolute" way of understanding the relationship between Church and government, or of understanding any of the relationships between the mandates. The mandates themselves are a part of the divinely ordained structure and thus are absolute for man. And God is actively and absolutely administering them. But human interpretations and applications of the mandates can be nothing but relative.

iv Reality and Relativity

The question of the relative and the absolute is not phenomenally as manifest in the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as it is in the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr. For

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1. See ibid., pp. 310-311.

2. Ibid., p. 315.

Bonhoeffer the over-arching issue is reality and the realization of reality versus various types of "unreal" and partial perspective. So in order to associate these two great ethical and epistemological issues it is necessary, in the case of Bonhoeffer, to relate the concepts of "absolute" and "relative" to the terms and concepts of his view of reality.

Niebuhr and various other thinkers in the Anglo-American tradition tend to structure the real in accordance to whether it is basically fixed, continuous, self-determining, and unchanging (the absolute)[1] or whether it is basically changing, moving, and temporally-determined. But Bonhoeffer seems to structure the real according to a fundamental question of unity versus diversity. While it would be a tenuous undertaking to try to correlate these reality-pictures with exactness, it is apparent that they are at least comparable by means of analogy. It is a question of determining Bonhoeffer's concept of absolute and relative.

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[1] Of course not all English and Americans uniformly regard the absolute as static and unchanging, but the term seems to be used in this sense generally in ethical discussions. The question is not whether Anglo-American thinkers believe reality to be basically active or inactive, but rather how the notions of relative and absolute fit into the picture. Much has been said in Anglo-American ethical discussion in condemnation of absolutism interpreted as a kind of ideal fixity or empty perfection. The work of John Dewey in Reconstruction in Philosophy (Boston: the Beacon Press, 4th printing, 1960), pp. 161-186, is a case in point. Niebuhr tends to reject examples of ethical absolutism principally because he regards them as having some of the above characteristics.

The difference of opinion as to the characteristics of the absolute could be traced into history to its probable source in Greek philosophy. The essential nature of the absolute, common to both opinions (it is active or it is inactive) is that it is self-determining.

From the forgoing considerations, it is apparent that Bonhoeffer's absolute must be sought in his basic notion of reality as being whole. The absolute is the real. In human knowledge, the absolute is experienced as a relationship to God, the source and essence of reality. Bonhoeffer also regards the relative as real, but as real only in respect to its being in relation to God.

The real as absolute

Three characteristics stand out in regard to Bonhoeffer's "real." The real is a unity and it is dynamic and it is concrete. Bonhoeffer holds, as did Hegel before him, that ultimately all of reality must be recognized as belonging to God, and that it is a mistake to try to hold back any part of it from God's love, control, and being. According to dialectical logic, it is a mistake to interpret the law of contradiction as a principle of separation. It is an example of unreal thinking when by means of the law of contradiction we bifurcate reality into various dualisms or fragment it by isolating its parts from each other in the abstractions of thought. This is the either-or of discursive reason which, while perhaps inevitable from the human side, is inadequate in itself to comprehend with fullness the ultimate unity of the reality which is God.

The real in Bonhoeffer's view is never absolute in the sense of being static or fixed. In this we find a definite contrast to at least some Anglo-American interpretations of the absolute. The real as a whole is dynamic and ever-changing. Fixity, or the isolation of parts of the whole, constitutes the content of the kind of "abstraction" which Bonhoeffer inveighs against. It should not be assumed however, that Bonhoeffer makes *change itself* to be a basic principle of reality. We are able to perceive God's truth by means of theories of being as well as theories of action.[1] *Being dynamic* is a characteristic of the underlying reality, but dynamism in itself is in possession of no particualr being. The point which it is necessary to perceive here is that, given Bonhoeffer's concept of the fundamental unity of the real, it is impossible that there should be separated parts (either mental or physical) which are at rest. The parts are parts only because they are parts-of, because they are in relation to the whole. If any part is stopped or made to be "absolute" in the sense of being finalized, then it is no longer a part of the real. Bonhoeffer believes that reality is alive and moving, and that separating parts by discursive reason is abstraction. Since our minds operate in their highest refinement when abstracting, it is necessary to counteract this activity of reason with a response in faith to revelation, so that our relation to the real may itself be real and not partial.

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[1] The problem of man's perception of God's truth and how this becomes a part of human knowledge is treated in Bonhoeffer's *Act and Being*.

Concreteness is another characteristic of the real, for the opposite of concreteness is abstraction, in Bonhoeffer's view. Delineating opposites, as has been done in the preceding sentence, is itself an example of abstraction. Inasmuch as this is realized it becomes in a measure possible to overcome the abstraction and to get an understanding of the whole of thought and reality. Concreteness is necessary so that there may be a location for the real in human experience. In Anglo-American parlance, it is common to think of the concrete as that which is hard and fixed (cemented together, for instance). Bonhoeffer's conception of concreteness is that it is a localization of reality. The concrete is always in relation, a relation of action, so that inasmuch as an idea or an action or a thing becomes abstract in human conception it is in that degree less real. The concrete is simple, direct, lacking in unnecessary theory. It is the particular which operates and abides always within the universal. It is the relative within and in relation to the absolute and thus it too is real. As suggested earlier,[1] the formula for Bonhoeffer's basic view of reality is something like the Medieval conceptualist position, in that _distinction but not separation_ is the best way to understand the status of ideal reality. The ideal is located _within_ the unity of the real or absolute.

Unreality and relativity

Perhaps the most obvious thing about Bonhoeffer's ethical writings is his use of Jesus Christ as the fountainhead and end-all of thinking about ethical reality. This christocentrism is actually more than a centralizing of Christ, it is an identification of Christ with the real itself. Christ is God-become-man, the absolute _taking on_ the characteristics of the relative, the whole in the temporal form of the partial. So it is not surprising to find that Bonhoeffer structures the entirety of Western history according to that Christ-reality which he perceives to be its true "origin, essence, and goal." For him it is not just that Western man _should become_ relative to Christ or that he _used to be_ relative to Christ, but rather that he _now is_ relative to Christ, as he has been in the past, and that it is for him to begin to realize this relativity and to live accordingly. This is for Bonhoeffer a great fact of life; to realize it is to understand things as they really are.

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[1] See _supra_, pp. 202.

Therefore, man (as we have observed, he includes the whole of humanity in this concept of man, and considers Western man especially only because he must do so in order to be concrete) is inescapably relative: He can never be absolute except as a relative part of the absolute, which is God-in-Christ. To be relative is not in itself sin or evil. But to be relative and willfully to mistake that relativity for absoluteness--this is the essence of sin and evil. All men are relative to Christ; herein is reality. But when man insists on his apartness and independence he is fastening upon a partial thing--his own ability to make distinctions and think abstractly. He distinguishes his own individuality and mistakenly concludes that he is absolutely separate from God and others. The individual is truly a part of the real, but when man fixes upon this one part he creates a false reality which is in truth not reality at all, for this fixation leads to disintegration and grief for man as he really is and should become through faith. Concomitant with the fixation on one's own distinctness comes a loss of faith in that which is real, so that Western man in his progressive "enlightenment" and "emancipation" has by degrees moved ever closer to the brink of the nihilistic void which Bonhoeffer in his wartime perspective discerned all around him. In this view, a humanistic preoccupation with individual freedoms untowardly isolates man from the reality in which he lives, leading him toward his own destruction and the destruction of his culture in the relativistic orgy which is nihilism. In addition to this secular false-reality into which Western man has fallen, there is a "religious" false-reality which man fastens upon some partial religious perspective, isolating himself from the true reality of relation with other people. Man's "natural" state is to be relative to God and to be always open to the coming of Christ in which that relativity will be fulfilled. It is "unnatural" for man, whether by secular or religious means, to oppose that coming, with all of its implications for human living in both penultimate and ultimate periods.

In a description of good and evil as ontological there lies the implication that evil has being in its own right, which if true is an apparent contradiction to the assertions of ultimate unity which Bonhoeffer makes. There is an apparent ontological contradiction between an ethical dualism of a sort which Bonhoeffer asserts and the monistic character of reality which he likewise asserts. The solution to this problem must be sought in Bonhoeffer's treatment of human conception as inevitably partial. Penultimately, man requires the distinction between good and evil, which ontologically are represented by people--evil ones and good ones. But this distinction does not correspond to human bifurcations of ideal or conceptual modes. The evil ones are those who are "unnaturally" opposing the real, that is, they oppose their own and the world's reunification with the true form of the real, namely Christ. Ultimately, all distinction between good and evil can be left behind. But penultimately, in order that mentally and morally men may find meaning, it is necessary to assert the distinction between ontological (a state of being directed relative to Christ) good and ontological evil.

Relativity included in unity

Bonhoeffer believed that the cure for the sickness of the Western world in its devotion to false realities is that man must be made to "realize" that his relativity is in fact a relation to the absolute. This is an important understanding of the word and concept of "relativity." Modern man commonly perceives his relativity and becomes proud of it, assuming that it means absolute freedom if not absolute power to fashion his own destiny. It is from such arbitrary philosophies that modern theories of ethical relativism stem. But the meaning of human "relativity" is that there is an absolute to which, being relative, man is related. For Bonhoeffer, man must first of all realize that he is not sufficient unto himself, that he is not isolated or abstracted from humanity and God, that he is inextricably a part of the whole unity of reality. It would be too easy to dismiss Bonhoeffer's "realization" as some sort of mental trick, whereas in his view of mentality and reality this can never be "merely" a quirk of one's mind. When one realizes his fundamental unity with reality one is in fact of being united with that reality, and the realization of this reality carries sanctions in that it affects his entire outlook and behavior forthwith. This is not something which the mind of man has somehow accomplished. In Bonhoeffer's opinion, a humanistic idealism would never serve to accomplish such realization. But it is a fact of being which has been accomplished in the past, due to the action of God in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, and which man appropriates for himself in the "realization" of its truth for him.

In realizing one's unity with reality one likewise realizes God's unity with the whole of worldly reality. It is necessary to distinguish once again between "unity" and "identity." Unity is a fact of reality, a fact of activity and being together. Identity is an abstract mode of thought akin to the principle of contradiction. Bonhoeffer considers both of these principles to be basically unreal when considered in detachment from the whole. Perhaps it is inescapable that we should think in terms of identity and contradiction, but thought itself is a part of the unity of reality and must be realized as such through faith and response to the revelation of God. So God is not identical with the world, any more than one individual can be recognized as identical with another. Identification is an operation of human reason which needs to be tempered with faith. In this way Bonhoeffer's views can be defended against any charges of "pantheism," should such charges be considered. To our penultimate understanding, God is distinct from the world, but in response to God's own revelation of himself to us we understand in faith that he is not separate from the world in the sense of being isolated from it.

In Bonhoeffer's writings, the realization of one's unity with the whole of God's reality is translated into the Christian parlance of "justification." Realization is not a power of man which has only to be exercised in order to be effective. Rather it is part and parcel the work of God himself, a work which has already been accomplished by God's redemptive action in Jesus Christ. God has acted to reconcile the whole world to himself--the world which has in sin alienated itself into tiny fragments and which has over and over again interpreted itself atomistically and dualistically. The reconciliation as applied to man, both individually and socially, is justification. In justification man's partial views and perspectives are forgiven and, ultimately, done away. Human pseudo-relativity is overcome in fact by God's act of reconciling the relative to the absolute. The relative, being "justified," does not cease to be relative, but has become relative to the real, that is, to Christ. It is not that relativity is removed by God's justification, but that it is made true rather than false relativity.

So it is through the gospel that mankind is forgiven and justified and made new in relation to the absolute reality which is God. This is the principal task of the Church, then, to proclaim the gospel so that mankind may realize unity with the real and thus receive the new being which has already been effected. Man is not passive in justification, for he is himself a part of the dynamic real and so his reception of justification is a receptivity of response, of action. Man comes to forget his relativity, considered as a preoccupation which formerly had absorbed him, and enters into true relativity--a relativity in which he comprehends himself as and in fact is "a being for others." This is what the human Christ was. Man the forgiven and reconciled becomes a Christ to his neighbors, acting always in responsibility and suffering and incurring of guilt for them in conformation to the true form of mankind.

Bonhoeffer also stresses the second way in which God acts in the world to maintain the world, to preserve the order of things as he has created them, and to stem humanity's headlong pseudo-relativistic rush toward nihilism and meaninglessness. This is the law, the structure of things as they really are. It is the ontological aspect of reality which, while allowing reality to be dynamic and alive, maintains that reality as real by preventing it from becoming unreal. Bonhoeffer speaks of "God's commandment" in terms of both gospel and law, for both are means by which God's commandment for his creation is carried out. The form of Christ (the "real" man or "justified" humanity, which are concepts of reality understood through faith, involving dynamic change in terms of the gospel) is a form only inasmuch as it has shape as well as movement. The real is not an amorphous and inchoate mass of movement, but rather it is an ordered, structured whole which has meaning not only because it is unified and alive and concrete, but also because it is fundamentally permanent. The permanence is not a fixed or rigid characteristic; it is not a characteristic at all, but it is the basic ground for all perception and all action, without which there would be no existence and no meaning.

Concerning epistemology, it is needful to reiterate that in Bonhoeffer's understanding of reality there is a positive as well as a negative place for human reason. The negative aspects of reason have already been mentioned, in terms of the inadequacy of "ideal" and "abstract" conceptions to convey reality itself. The positive picture is of a human rationality which, being a part of the real and able to interpret the real intelligibly, is also structured and ordered (at least potentially) so that it validly perceives the basic permanences within itself and within the whole of the real. Man is able to perceive and use basic structural rights and obligations within the real, though of course he is likely to misinterpret these according to his own partial perspectives of pseudo-relativity. Bonhoeffer asserts that God has established the mandates (compare to Luther's "orders of creation") which are both structural permanences in the real and also modes of God's continual activity. Man may resist the mandates but he will never be able to destroy the fact of their presence, and in his resistance to the mandates man only proves and extenuates his own alienation from the real.

Bonhoeffer believed that a historical resolution and restoration is possible, even for Western man in his nihilistic adventures. It is possible because with God all things are possible. It can take place historically by the realization of justification on the part of more and more of individual men, and more slowly in a process of social and cultural healing, a readjustment to God's absolute rule in life.

It becomes important in all of this to emphasize the concrete and dynamic characteristics of reality, inasmuch as ethical thinking in the past has tended to occupy itself with formal and structural elements and so to become abstract and basically useless. Ethical discussion, with its tendencies toward universalization and abstract principles, must become only a secondary recourse for man. The heart of ethics is action, and in most cases action goes without saying. There are situations in which abstract reflection is needed, but Bonhoeffer's point is that such reflection must be kept in its proper place, as a reserve strength which man's intelligence has for use. It must not be allowed to be an end in itself. Man is relative to Christ, which means that his actions must be done in free relation. They must not be rigidly controlled by abstract rules which distort situations and warp human intercourse. Good and evil are ontological, structural opposites. As such they are not commonly interpretable according to human principles, for man in discerning goodness and evil is expressing his partial viewpoint, a viewpoint which can never be absolute in itself. It is legitimate to speak of good and evil, but not to claim "absolute"--that is, rigid and final--authority for the object of one's speech. The "real" man speaks with caution and assurance, confident of the truth of that which he utters because of his relativity to Christ and his justified status relative to God.

CONCLUSION

In Chapter I "ethical relativism" was defined as an attitude or theoretical position which denies the validity of ethical absolutes that subsist autonomously and impinge upon human ethical choosers. The variations of this position which were discussed may be summarized as follows:

(1). There is no universally objective basis for individual choice of values or obligations. Objectively, values and obligations are equally preferable and thus depend upon individual choice. Scientific knowledge of human society and psychology is often cited in support of this interpretation of ethics.

(2). Values are both known and created in one and the same act. R. B. Perry describes this view as a "vicious" skepticism.

(3). Values are not objectively valid, that is, they are not the property of some object in itself, but are created in the relation of the ethical subject to the object of his desire.

(4). Theories of "situational ethics" are relativistic insofar as they may deny the existence of absolute values or make obligations to depend wholly upon the changing conditions of human experience.

(5). "Cultural relativism" is relativistic because it emphasizes the cultural origination of values and obligations, asserting that all said values and obligations are selected by particular cultures in light of their particular needs.

(6). An extreme emphasis upon change which makes change itself to be absolute is an increasingly common type of relativism. In this view, the individual is thought to be the source of value and obligation, and ethical decisions are made relative only to him.

Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer may be partly understood as being in general reaction[1] to the above types of ethical relativism. As analyzed in this work, their thinking appears to converge at the following points:

(a). They distinguish between "relativity," which is understood as a factual characteristic of creation and history, and "relativism," an attitude which they interpret as reprehensible because it is destructive of meaning and social good. Created human nature is such that man depends upon a basic meaning and intelligibility. Reality is intelligible when there are factors of structural permanence discernible within it. In ethical decision-making, intelligent choices are made according to principles of intelligibility that correspond to reality. Relativism constitutes a denial of structural permanences and of the existence of objective ethical principles. It is a capitulation of the theoretical "ought" to the descriptive "is" of human relativity. Therefore it is singularly unhelpful as a means of social improvement and progress in moral areas.

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[1] "Reaction" is used here to indicate a kind of response to relativism, and is not intended in the sense of a reactionary defensiveness.

(b). Ethical relativism is refutable because it is partially in error. An objective absolute does exist and moreover it is pertinent for ethical thinking and moral decision-making. Men have a sense and conception of the absolute which provides order for their lives and a meaningful rationale for making moral decisions. The absolute is God. Men know the absolute through religious faith. Faith transcends and includes reason, providing basic certainties concerning reality upon which all rational knowledge must stand.

(c). Traditional Christian solutions of ethical problems need to be adjusted to accommodate to contemporary awareness of the facts of relativity. Both Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer believe that many present alternatives are inadequate to meet complex ethical demands. Niebuhr refutes both "orthodoxy" and "naturalism." Bonhoeffer refutes both "religion" and secular "godlessness."

Niebuhr sees relativity as a condition of human nature which is one of the conditions for sin. Due to his spiritual aspect of self-transcendence, man can discern his own lack of absoluteness and in anxiety be moved to rebel against his relative predicament. He attempts to be absolute and often believes that his own ideas or achievements attain this height. But in fact all elements of human knowledge and every human achievement are relative, never absolute. Man's ethical absolutisms thus distort reality and tend to breed a legalism, complacency, and superciliousness which result in injustice and tyranny. Human relativity permeates the whole of history, so that in history even the absolute Christian ethical ideal must be translated into approximate and relative terms, ones which fit presupposed societal categories of change and complexity and self-interest.

For Bonhoeffer also, relativity is factual in the penultimate experiences of this world. The true nature of God's reality is that all people are relative to Christ, who is their absolute--their true "form," their "origin, essence, and goal." Reality is essentially unified, but within the one reality there are parts and distinctions which, if considered exclusively in themselves, are unreal.

In Bonhoeffer's view, there is both a true relativity and a false relativity. True relativity involves a realization of being in relation to Christ; it is being naturally turned toward the coming of Christ in the hope of an ultimate consummation of all things. False relativity is any kind of partial perspective. Bonhoeffer calls this attitude "arbitrariness" and "abstraction." It is this false relativity in Bonhoeffer's work which we have identified as "relativism." He believed that the whole of Western society has progressively embraced a pseudo-relativity which has led us to the brink of the void of moral chaos and meaninglessness. False relativity includes every arbitrary kind of absolutism, which in fact is partiality pretending to wholeness. It also includes the technique of seeking out "extreme" solutions for ethical problems, either by radically excluding the penultimate from our perspective or else by excluding the ultimate by means of compromise. Pseudo-relativity (relativism) is an attitude which is "unnatural" for man, for it directs contemporary reality away from Christ, from its true form. Examples of it are found in secular humanism, though humanism in itself is not false, but it becomes false whenever it assumes an absolute character. Various kinds of dualistic thinking are "abstractions" for Bonhoeffer, for he believes that the necessary distinctions which thought delineates within the real should not be pressed into inflexible finalities. The absolute is dynamic and concrete, that is, localized and limited (as experienced in human perception). Therefore it is not particularly helpful to talk in terms of ethical principles which are absolute in the sense of being "timeless and placeless." This kind of moralism is not intentionally or consciously relativistic, but it plays into the hand of relativism because it is an approach which tends to ignore the concrete. Concentrating upon ultimates tends to make them disappear or dissolve into penultimate elements of knowledge. Ethical living for the most part can go undiscussed. Another kind of ethical thinking which contributes to relativism is that which emphasizes various supposed "equalities" and "rights." Bonhoeffer insists that through creation God has established things structurally in official positions of superiority and inferiority, and that this structure can be broken down only at the risk of falsifying reality or at the expense of rational meaning and order. Stress upon human equalities and rights may be needed when social problems arise, but to champion these principles as absolutes is to abstract from the real.

In Niebuhr's view, relativism is an epistemological peril which poses a threat to pragmatic hopes for bettering society through rational means. Relativism would not be intolerable if it did not lead to skepticism and cynicism and toward the "abyss of nihilism." In Faith and History, Niebuhr discusses the problem of relativism as a historical problem which arises from the difficulty of superceding the obvious relativity of all historical thought. He is critical of the "liberal" emphasis upon a mutual toleration of all viewpoints, for he perceives that in a situation where there is no absolute truth responsible and constructive social action is difficult, in that men are tempted in cynicism to absolutize their own subjective viewpoints. But he likewise exposes the fallacies within ideological absolutisms which pretend to hold an objectively absolute character that in fact they cannot possess.

Both Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer are men of faith, and for them only God is truly absolute. But the problem in this faith-perspective, of course, is how the absolute becomes real within the relative. Both thinkers insist that this has happened and continues to happen. For Niebuhr, the absolute has entered history in Christ, and even now serves man as an epistemological guideline, a love-ideal which clarifies historical ambiguity and enables men to act in reasonable responsibility amidst moral confusion and complexity. In perceiving his own relativity man achieves a measure of transcendence over it. This robs relativity of its sting and of its absolute control over his actions. Man glimpses himself "from the standpoint of God," or "from beyond," as it were. Human thinking is aided by a combination of empirical self-observation with an interpretation of scriptural revelation as symbolically relevant in all historical situations. The law of human nature is love; man cannot live without love and without others to whom he relates in love. Love is an absolute relation. The ideal of selflessness, forgiveness, and concern for others becomes relevant in all human relationships. This universal relevance obtains both because love is a human "impossibility" (man cannot accomplish it fully out of his own resources) and a divine possibility (it is an ideal which man is able to apply and approximate in every situation because it is not exhausted within any particular one). Love both fulfills and negates human approximations of it. As an ideal, love can be only approximated in history, but because it is an ideal, it is universally applicable.

Reason is an instrument through which man can overcome his self-interest by emphasizing the objective structural factors which provide order and continuity in his understanding. Faith supplies a frame of reference through which total meaning is supplied. For Niebuhr, reason aided by faith is able to perceive societal tendencies, factors in human nature, and general principles of order which are permanent aspects of history. And it is through achievements of approximating ethical ideals (both the pure ideal of love and the relative translations of love into justice and equality) that man is able to make society tolerable and even to improve it slowly. The ethical ideals serve a dual function: (1) they are guiding principles for rational adjustments which free the self relatively from self-interest, and (2) they justify social coercion in achieving better states of justice. Niebuhr conceives of the function of the Church in similar terms, for its task is to raise and answer religious questions which will help us to achieve a balance of justice over injustice--a pragmatic goal.

Bonhoeffer's treatment for ethical relativism is a "realized" ethic in which man both lives and thinks "in correspondence with reality." Man must come to realize in faith the truth that God works in the world to preserve and restore that which he has created. This preservation and restoration become part of human knowledge in the law and the gospel. The law may be seen as part of God's "concrete commandment" which is actualized in history through the mandates. None of the mandates is absolute in the sense of being rigid and inflexible, but their purpose is to carry out God's absolute commandment through preserving creation from an arbitrary disintegration. God has created the world so that there exist structural principles, such as the "rights of natural life," which are rationally understood and implemented, and the relations of superiority and inferiority, which provide a "warrant" for ethical discourse in the first place (since they make ethical authority and instruction possible). The gospel involves human realization through faith of the unity of reality due to the reconciling action of Christ. Ethically it is a question of being conformed to the form of Christ, concretely in this life, achieving the fullness of humanity relative to Christ.

There must be an intellectualization of this realization, according to the themes of unity and distinction-within-unity (concretion). But it is concrete living rather than intellectualization which is the central goal of ethics. Rational reflection may be needed as a subsidiary means for solving ethical problems, but for the most part life is to be lived as it really is. This means, for Bonhoeffer, that life is to be lived to the full, including as parts of its real experience both enjoyment and suffering. It means that one is willing and ready to accept guilt for others, to be a whole person, by taking on the "I of Jesus" indicatively. Life is to be harmonious in relation to the basic "ground bass" which God supplies. The "real man" is genuinely "worldly" and natural and penultimate because he neither rejects nor deifies his humanity and its partial perspectives. He is able to embrace the secular world as good because it belongs to God.

He does God's will as a matter of course in the life of faith, not constantly agonizing over his relative state of "goodness." He is really free and knows it because he is obeying God's command to freedom, a freedom in which he lives in responsibility and deputyship for all others.

We now conclude that, in the ethical thought of Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer, the various relativistic interpretations are either contradicted or else accepted as true by incorporation into a larger scheme of meaning.

The truth of (1) is essentially denied in Niebuhr's thought by his appeal to "societal tendencies" and "fairly universal" ethical principles that, howevermuch they may differ in content, are objectively valid as structural approximations of the absolute, and are available to human reason within history. Bonhoeffer's use of the "law" and his conception of God's "commandment" as effected through the mandates likewise is in contradiction to (1). The mandates are to a great extent determinative for values and obligations, although relatively so and not in terms of their precise content. The law and God's commandment are universally and objectively valid.

Neither Niebuhr nor Bonhoeffer countenance the relativism of (2), wherein individuals create their own values in the act of knowledge. This, they agree, is a debilitative kind of skepticism which simply cannot be followed if meaning and society as we know it are to continue.

It appears that both Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer accept (3) as true, since both emphasize the factor of relationship and being in relation as essential for Christian ethics. Neither regards values as purely a characteristic of objects. Both stress the interrelation of human beings, and with Bonhoeffer, especially, the interrelation of God and man is central to ethical reality. But neither would agree precisely with Perry's individualistic interpretation of the creation of values. For both, as we have seen, the absolute (God) exists and is relevant for human value cognition. Man the subject does not create his own values irrespective of the "real" environment which impinges upon him. With Niebuhr, there is opposition to the "naturalism" of Perry's interpretation, while Bonhoeffer would probably treat it as an "abstraction" which arbitrarily isolates man the individual.

There is much in the thinking of both Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer which is in agreement with "situational ethics" (4). They both protest vigorously against every kind of ethical "absolutism" whereby situational variations are ignored or distorted. They advocate a freedom and flexibility wherein the empirical nuances of a changing world may be accepted and incorporated into Christian ethical life. But they are not "conditionalists" or extreme situationalists who deny the existence and validity of ethical principles. Both respect the use of reason within situations, and hold that reason is able to relate situations to each other according to universal similarities or structures, such as Bonhoeffer's "rights of natural life" and Niebuhr's "societal tendencies."

Niebuhr discounts the conclusions of cultural relativism (5) by his claim that it is overly "deterministic" and therefore incognizant of the reality of human freedom to choose and act within history. Bonhoeffer seems to reinterpret cultural relativism according to relativity to Christ. It is not just individuals but also groups which for Bonhoeffer are relative (either in relation or out of relation) to Christ. He believes that the whole of Western society has abandoned its true form and can be saved from the resulting condition of false relativity only through a re-assumption of the true "origin, essence, and goal" which is the form of all cultures.

There is nothing but opposition in Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer for such thoroughgoing relativism as is described in (6). It is precisely this ethical condition which they disparage as "nihilism," "the void," and "meaninglessness," a condition which is wholly intolerable for mankind. Change is real, but change itself is only an aspect of reality and is not absolute.

The position of ethical relativism, then, is ultimately an intolerable one because it leads toward the end of society as we know it. Neither Niebuhr nor Bonhoeffer finds any satisfactory basis for making ethical decisions within the scope of a relativistic motif in which all semblances of the absolute have disappeared. Their analysis of human nature is such that man is seen to be dependent on (1) the structural forms of community and created reality, and (2) divine revelation within human experience for obtaining the kind of meaning which makes ethical living possible and satisfying.

For both Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer, the truth of the Christian faith precludes the validity of most relativistic solutions. It allows man to be where he has experienced himself to be--in relationship to a God who is higher and greater than man. A man who has truly experienced God cannot help being convinced of his own relativity. But the experience of God also prevents him from involuting experience toward the relativistic conclusion that his relativity, whether individually or culturally conceived, is the last word for knowledge. In short, the Christian *knows* that there is an absolute which is the basic condition of the relative and to which the relative, if it is to be genuinely relative, must react and respond and adjust. Only in a response to the absolute is there any final and satisfying ethical meaning.

For Niebuhr, man heeds the solid perspective for his frame of meaning which only a true absolute can supply. For Bonhoeffer, the absolute is always present but must be realized through faith in order for man to live responsibly. Whereas Niebuhr holds that man transcends his bonds of relativity enough to perceive glimpses of an external absolute and reach out towards it, Bonhoeffer interprets reality itself (when understood in faith) as an absolute which includes every relativity. Niebuhr's Christian is one who allows the "white light" of a pure ideal (absolute) to aid epistemologically in his interpretations of human society and to provide a relevant goal which man may approximate in his constant activistic grappling with the complexities and relativities of ethical awareness. Bonhoeffer's Christian is one for whom striving after ideals has taken its place in the ordered but not wholly serene environment of being in a relationship of responsibility and servitude to others. In neither case is the absolute a thing to be grasped, possessed, guarded and defended, but rather it is a reality to which man reacts positively in a this-worldly effort to bring changes wherein the Christian values of love and obedience may be effective for the good of mankind.

Our overall conclusion, for the establishment of which Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer have been used to provide evidence and insight, is that contemporary relativism, for all of its popularity, is subject to criticism at several points. There are both theoretical and practical difficulties which appear to be inherent in it. Aside from other logical difficulties which append to particular theories of cultural and psychological relativism, the general theory of relativism is questionable in the following ways.

Meaning and intelligibility depend upon some absolute permanence within the scope of knowledge. Unless there is some permanent point of reference, any frame of meaning is purely arbitrary, and meaningful communication is obviated. Without some absolute, knowledge is disjointed and inconsistent, nothing really makes final sense, and meaninglessness results. The extreme realtivist refutes himself, as Plato showed in the Theatetus, for if value depends upon opinion alone, then the absolutist's opinion has to be true and there are indeed absolute truths of ethics. This is an ancient objection to theoretical relativism, but even though it is old it is still relevant. For the contemporary Christian, Niebuhr's "frame of meaning" and Bonhoeffer's "unified reality" provide an absolute basis for ethical knowledge and a bulwark against nihilism. Both of these are rationally understood, but are appropriated or realized only through faith. Relativity takes on real meaning only when it is relative to the absolute.

The facts of social reality tend to obviate theoretical relativism, for there do exist structural permanences which can be discovered and followed. Niebuhr finds in society general tendencies toward natural social laws. These are based on the self-consciousness of the transcendent human self which contemplates itself rationally and develops a reliance upon social principles through its dependence upon the group for self-fulfillment. Bonhoeffer insists that the real is structured permanently by "God's commandment," which takes effect in the divine mandates, a hierarchical order of superiority and inferiority, and in the basic "rights of natural life."

But it usually takes more than theoretical difficulties to deter modern practitioners of ethical relativism. So if it can be shown that some of the practical consequences to which it leads are undesirable, then perhaps more will have actually been accomplished toward persuading people to reconsider their easily-held relativistic attidudes.

If allowed to proceed unchecked, relativism leads in the direction of social chaos. Where everyone insists upon rights and freedoms and no one pays attention to responsibilities, the social (and individual) good is hurt. This is true also for situations in which men despair of agreement on social and ethical issues. There is a very real practical chaos abuilding today wherein people and even governments are loath to claim that they are in the right. As Niebuhr shows, this situation makes it easy for "the children of darkness" to win their cynical victories. Where objective social absolutes are not recognized and maintained, there are opportunities for various falsely-absolutistic ideologies to establish control. Bonhoeffer shows this clearly in his description of the "void" of our times, wherein there is mass ethical confusion and many false gods are followed, but none can really avail until the true form of Christ has been assumed. The best way to repress illegitimate absolutisms is to show that they are really relativities, and that they do not measure up to what is truly absolute.

A practical balance of justice over injustice and equity over inequity can best be achieved and maintained through an ethical policy which strives to implement absolute values within relative situations. Without absolute ideals men lack the vision of direction and possibility which are needed in order for their own social plans to move progressively forward toward fulfillment. Niebuhr shows how only a "transcendent" religious faith affords an ethic in which one's ideals are both absolute and yet fully relevant. And Bonhoeffer holds that social intercourse will be conducted with full naturalness and freedom only when it is done in the realization that there is conformation (true relativity) to Christ.

In summary, if we are to believe Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer, the difference between vicious relativism and true relativity is the difference between partial truth and complete truth, the difference between humanistic striving and religious faith, the difference between false theories and a true understanding of what it means to be a human being. Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer are both conservative in that they insist that a return to biblical faith and to the "true form" of Christ is necessary if contemporary crucial ethical problems are to be solved and if equitable social intercourse and meaning are to be recovered. They are constant in their conviction that man does have at his disposal the rational and religious means to overcome the manifold problems of ethics with which modernity surrounds him.

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